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SEPTEMBER

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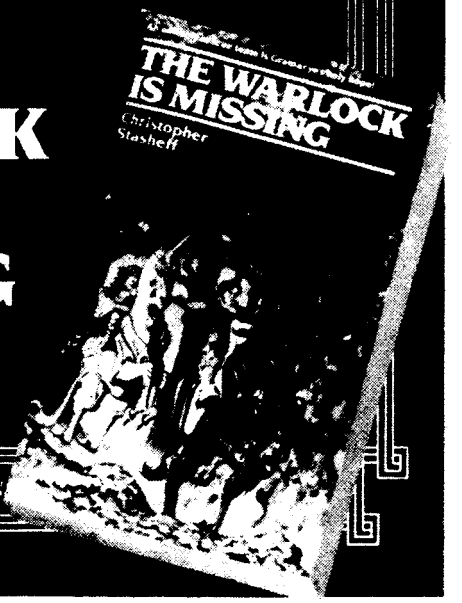

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W. Warren Wagar wrote "The Day of No-Judgment," (April 1986). His new story concerns an unflappable female attorney who happens to be president of the U.S. and who is forced to face, almost simultaneously, an imminent war with the Soviets and an alien visitation . . .

The President's Worm

BY

W. WARREN WAGAR

On the day, a warm Wednesday in July, that the Federal chancellor met with the secretary-general of the ruling party of the GDR to proclaim the reunification of Germany, a glassy capsule one meter long and forty centimeters in circumference was discovered on the White House lawn by a groundskeeper.

He reported it to a Secret Service agent, who consulted his superiors. A squad of agents soon descended on the spot, accompanied by several explosives specialists. Using the instruments of their trade, the specialists ruled out the possibility that the capsule was a bomb. When someone finally tried to lift the object, its gleaming surface dissolved to a dull gray.

The men shrank back, giving the object a wide berth, but it remained inert. One of the men, a bit more foolhardy than his colleagues, advanced and touched it again.

"It's a big worm!" he said, half in surprise, half in awe.

The groundskeeper chuckled. "I've been tending lawns and gardens for twenty-five years, boys, and I promise you, that thing ain't no worm."

At this point the worm quivered, stretched, and slowly but efficiently tunneled into the moist earth.

"Shiiiit!" said the groundskeeper.

In Berlin the chancellor and her opposite number from the GDR clinked glasses to toast their signatures on the agreement declaring the indissoluble union of their respective polities.

In Moscow, Chairman Rostopchin ordered his marshals to bring their troops in the GDR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the western republics of the Soviet Union to full readiness for war within forty-eight hours.

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The mood in the White House was mixed. The president's national security advisor expected the worst, and relished the prospect. Some of the other top people, especially from State, thought it was all a Soviet bluff, but supported a tough stance. True to form, the secretary of defense sucked on his pipe and counseled extreme caution. He was a good bureaucrat, but he had no stomach for emergencies.

The president alone stayed cool. In her ice-blue dress and rhinestone choke, she conveyed an almost royal calm.

No irrevocable decisions were taken that day in Washington. The president proclaimed that she would "sleep on it," and outside her quarters, the Secret Service imported an expert on invertebrate zoology from Georgetown University who spent hours thumping the ground and examining the rather astonishing hole left by the worm after it had wriggled out of sight.

"It's really not possible," he told his dark-suited companions. "Annelids grow sometimes to three, even five or six meters in length, but they're never so thick, even leeches, and this was too long for a leech."

"But we all saw it," one of the agents said, for the tenth time.

"Yes," the zoologist sighed, "you must have seen something."

The next day, Thursday, official Washington was unusually quiet. The press buzzed around anyone who showed his or her face, hoping for clues, but their questions were brushed aside with the courteous sangfroid of the president herself. Brief, unhelpful press releases translated into vaguely ominous headlines. President Weighs Options. Pentagon Refuses Comment. U.N. Ambassador Voices Concern.

Overseas, it was no different. Kremlin Silent. Berlin Rejoices, Then Holds Breath. Consultations in Warsaw.

It took the zoologist from Georgetown all day to reestablish contact with the worm, but he was a patient man, and eventually, with the help of the Secret Service and a pup tent, he succeeded.

For an hour, man and worm confronted one another. The scientist snapped hundreds of pictures from every possible angle.

In due course the worm raised its prostomium in a gesture that could almost be read as a greeting, and planted its wet mouth on the zoologist's palm.

They communed for a few seconds, and then the worm obediently crawled into a cage that was sitting out of sight in the tent.

On the assurance that the annelid posed no threat to national security, the Secret Service agent on duty at the time allowed the cage to be carried into the White House for closer study. The zoologist promised to take

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it back to his laboratory as soon as possible, but he wanted a chance to examine it under proper lighting while, as he said, the worm was showing itself so cooperative.

Once inside, however, the worm appeared to lose its temper. It pushed insistently against the door of the cage, and when the door was opened, it wriggled at high speed — for any worm — off the table, down a leg onto the floor, and across the floor toward another room.

The zoologist could easily have picked it up and returned it to its cage, but he was, like all good scientists, ungovernably curious.

"You'd swear that worm knew where it was going," he muttered.

Joined now by a mate, the Secret Service agent drew his gun, but the zoologist raised his hand.

"Wait," he said in a low voice. "It has an idea."

The agents exchanged glances. The one with the gun shrugged his shoulders, and the agents took up positions on opposite sides of the worm, following its progress with measured steps.

The worm made its way down a deserted corridor (it was now early evening) and stopped before a closed door.

"Open that door," the zoologist said.

The door was not locked. Inside they found a lone newswoman entering a story into a computer.

When she saw the annelid approaching, her mouth dropped open.

"What the hell is that?" she asked, more amused than scared.

"Something we found on the White House lawn," the zoologist replied. "Stick around and you might get a story."

The Secret Service agent with the gun started to object, but his colleague hushed him.

They all watched as the worm confidently mounted the computer and settled part of its bristly gray belly just above the central processing unit. The journalist pushed back, still on her chair, and surrendered her keyboard to the searching head of the worm.

"It looks like a jumbo earthworm," she said.

"Sure does," the zoologist agreed.

"Where are its eyes?"

"They're too small to see. The typical earthworm has them all over its body."

"How can it be so big?"

The zoologist was still pondering how to answer her when the worm began to enter a message.

"My God!" he said. "My God!"

When the tapping stopped, the journalist bent forward to read what was on the screen.

She laughed, with a hint of hysteria in her voice.

"It says — oh damn, I can't believe this!" She took a deep breath. "It says, word for word: 'I am not an Earth worm.'"

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The story was on everyone's television screen by midnight EDT. The awe that might have greeted reports of a bearded giant with an echo-chamber voice emerging from a vast golden spaceship seemed somehow inappropriate for a wisecracking worm.

Nevertheless, the worm commanded attention. The public had been prepared for such "close encounters" by a century of science fiction, in magazines, books, and films. Most reporters and street-scene interviewees were quite ready to believe that the animal had journeyed, in some way or other, from a distant star. Its arrival on the White House lawn in the midst of the most serious international crisis since the American invasion of the Philippines was generally perceived as an attempt to save humanity from itself.

"Somebody up there does care," said an old woman in Pittsburgh to a reporter Friday morning. Her crinkly face and tangle of white hair caught the nation's fancy. The footage of her interview was aired over and over again through the weekend.

Meanwhile, a hastily assembled meeting of White House staffers reached the conclusion that the worm should be taken to their leader without further delay. Shortly after lunchtime on Friday July 14, the worm had its first audience with Mary Louise Diorio, forty-third president of the United States of America.

A specially modified computer with the central processing unit fully exposed was installed in a room set aside for the visitor. By trial and error earlier in the day, the zoologist and two computer scientists had ascertained that the worm could understand any message entered into the computer and reply without touching the keyboard, if the setae of its middle segments were allowed to contact the CPU.

The president took it all in her stride, as anyone would have foreseen.

After a variety of administrations headed by earnest Sunday school teachers, celluloid cowboys, and histrionic messiahs, the Republic had found a certain comfort in the leadership of a ruthlessly practical, unflappable female attorney.

"The show's over," she had told her party's nominating convention on the night of her acceptance. "America has been onstage long enough. Let's get down to business and make this country work."

She was forty-eight, tall, slim, pleasant-looking but not at all glamorous. Various male supporters said, only among themselves, that she "thought like a man."

At any rate, she was logical, and she never wasted a word or a gesture or a single minute of the time the electorate paid her to devote to public service.

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Her husband, an economist at Johns Hopkins, kept out of the news with a skill that made all four living ex-First Ladies sick with envy.

"Welcome to Earth, worm," the president tapped.

"Touché," the worm replied.

"Do you have a name!"

"At one time I did. But since there are only two of us communicating, no one will be confused. Why bother with formalities?"

The president nodded to herself. It was a worm after her own heart.

"Where is your home planet?"

"I was hatched in a life-contoured asteroid traveling in deep space. But my ancestors evolved on the fourth planet of a yellow star approximately 3,250 light years from you."

"How did you make your flight to Earth?"

"I am self-powered. I extrude an impermeable shell to protect my body from cold and radiation. We may have a chance to discuss the physics later, but please, tell me. You are the president?"

"I am."

"Very good. You are the person I needed to contact. How much time do we have?"

President Diorio consulted her watch. "At least fifty minutes, if you understand our way of measuring time. I am scheduled to meet with the secretary of defense at three o'clock."

"Tell me exactly what your watch says now."

"Two oh-seven."

"Yes. I have marked it. We can proceed, but I hope you will grant me further opportunities tomorrow, or perhaps sooner."

"That all depends."

The worm hesitated. "That all depends on whether our conversation is profitable to you?"

"Yes."

"Very good. We understand one another. Please, express to me your feelings at this time."

The president frowned. "About what?"

"I am sorry. About the imminent destruction of your society."

"With any luck, we won't be destroying anything," she replied, cocking her head to get a better look at her impassive visitor, half a meter from her nose as she sat at the keyboard. It barely moved. If three scientists of unimpeachable credentials had not assured her that the worm was alive and for real, she wold have suspected a hoax.

"Yes, of course," the worm wrote. "This is what you must hope. However, there is a 95 percent probability that a war will break out in five days. It will start with an attack on the army of the German Democratic Republic by the army of the Soviet Union and will quickly escalate into an 11,500-megaton exchange of nuclear weapons ultimately terminating higher animal life from the North Pole to thirty degrees south. Below that lati-

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tude scattered human communities will survive and continue to flourish for thousands of years at a technological level roughly equivalent to Persia's in the reign of Cyrus the Great."

The president allowed her eyes to widen slightly. She pursed her lips, thinking what to enter into the computer.

She was ordinarily a fast typist, but now she chose her words with special care, picking them out letter by letter.

"Please give me the source of your information."

"Calculations based on studies of several hundred anthropoid cultures, togther with ten years of analysis of Earth telecommunications broadcasts while I was in orbit."

The president sat back in her chair.

"You're an anthropologist?" she entered.

"Nothing so grand."

"A futurist?"

"No, I am not a scholar at all. Just a newsperson."

"On an interstellar newsbeat?"

"Yes. Please accept my apologies for any obscurity. I make use of techniques developed by others, whch are actually not at all difficult to apply."

"And you want to interview me?"

"Yes, please."

President Diorio took a deep breath. She broke off contact, took the printout from the machine, and handed it to her chief of staff, who was hovering nervously behind her.

"Read it and weep, Fred," she said softly.

He needed only a minute.

"I don't believe a word of it," he snorted.

"You don't believe that the worm is extraterrestrial?"

"Oh, sure. What choice do I have? But not the crap about the end of the world, Madam President. He's some kind of cosmic eco-freak, trying to scare you. Carl Sagan has been singing that song for twenty years and more."

"But the Nuclear Winter hypothesis has been sustained by every reputable research project that's been devoted to it since the mid-eighties. The science is sound."

The chief of staff waved his hand angrily. "That's not the point. This thing is hoping to get you to back off in Germany. Lord knows why. Nobody can possibly tell what the results of U.S. policy wil be, whether we'll have a war or not, but he starts—"

"It. It starts."

"Sorry. It starts quoting you odds like some goddamn Mr. Spock. Don't listen, Madam President."

She gave the chief one of her notorious fixed stares. "I have to listen. What I don't have to do is change my mind because of what I hear."

"O.K., Madam President, of course, I know. I just wanted to get my two cents worth in."

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The president smiled briefly. "And I appreciate it, Fred, as always. What about the request for an interview?"

Fred smacked his forehead. "Holy shit, you're going to give an exclusive interview to a worm?"

"Why not?"

"Because he's faking, that's why not."

"Let's ask. I have the sense that the worm doesn't lie, even if it may not always know what it's talking about."

"By all means ask. But don't believe everything you read."

The president returned to the keyboard and made her apologies to the worm for the delay.

"I need to know why you are really here," she entered.

The worm did not hesitate. "I would like to interview you for the communications network of my society."

The chief of staff bent over the screen to read the reply. He shrugged.

"Is it possible that you have an ulterior motive?" the president asked.

"No," the worm answered. "It is my only assignment. I have covered four other imploding anthropoid cultures, and I am respected for my work."

"Have you any advice for us, based on your experience?"

"None. I would help you if I could, believe me, but our studies are purely empirical. We know only what happens in such cases. I cannot imagine how you would be able to prevent your wars. They are intrinsic to your system of social relations."

The president sighed.

"You may be right, at that," she replied. "I'm not wise enough to say. But we must make a deal, you and I."

"Please state your terms."

"I'll give you the interview on one condition. For every question I answer, you must answer one of mine, fairly and honestly."

"I have a condition of my own," the worm wrote.

"Yes?"

"Your questions must be asked by you and you only. I am unable to discuss technical matters with your scientists and generals."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, it would require too much time."

"After ten years of study," the president tapped, her fingers flying over the keys, "can't you spare us a week or two more?"

"I would gladly give you ten more years, but unfortunately, you cannot make use of them."

"Please explain."

"I have already explained. There is a 95 percent probability that your country and most of its allies and enemies will no longer exist in five days. I shall have to finish my observations from elsewhere."

The president stared at the worm, wishing she could somehow make eye contact.

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"It is almost three o'clock," she tapped. "I accept your condition, if you accept mine. Let's resume the interview this evening, and if necessary finish it tomorrow or the next day."

"Done."

At the president's urgent request, her chief of staff created a small ad hoc committee to draft questions for her to ask the worm. The questions were to be simple, short, and seemingly guileless. The members chosen were all but kidnapped from their homes, offices, vacation hideaways, or whatever: an exobiologist, two psychologists, one political scientist, two people each from State and the Pentagon, and the deputy commander of the Space/Ground ABM Center, who had to be flown at supersonic speeds from his underground HQ in Colorado. The chief of staff himself, on the president's do-or-die orders, agreed to chair the committee.

The world did not stop spinning, all the same.

Stories and speculation on the worm continued, but Central Europe got most of the coverage on the news programs that evening. Although Defense refused comment, Japanese satellite monitors were reported by "reliable sources" in Tokyo to have tracked long files of Soviet armor, trucks, guns, and troops on the move in the USSR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, matched by significant military stirrings in the GDR, by East German as well as Soviet forces. A terse public demand by the Kremlin to the authorities in Berlin to cancel their agreement with the authorities in Bonn, "or face the inevitable consequences," was interpreted by most Western commentators as an overture to serious hostilities.

The Germans on both sides did not flinch. In fact, the political pressures on Bonn from Washington, Paris, and London were almost as heavy as those on Berlin from Moscow, except that no one in NATO had any intention of trying to prevent the union of the two Germanies by force. President Diorio sent a personal message to the Federal chancellor imploring her to suspend reunification until a general peace congress could be convened to work out the details and give proper reassurances to Moscow and its allies.

"If you do not agree to this suspension, Frau Chancellor," the president's letter concluded, "I cannot guarantee that American forces stationed in Europe will remain committed to your defense."

The chancellor thought she knew a bluff when she saw one, although the president's reputation for steely candor made her just a little jittery. It was certainly not stupid to wonder if, in the final analysis, any American (or Briton or Frenchman) would be willing to fight the Battle of Armageddon so that Hamburgers and Dres-

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deners could lick the same postage stamps.

As for the worm, the hopes kindled by news of its arrival twenty-four hours earlier had lost some of their brightness. The White House was saying nothing of interest, and many people took the silence as an indication that miracles were not to be expected after all.

Skeptics began to make their appearance. A prominent conservative columnist circulated the rumor that the worm was an animatronic robot programmed to sap America's fighting spirit, no doubt a brainchild of the Union of Concerned Scientists or some other leftish organization scared of its own shadow. Confronted on television, he admitted that the worm was probably not a robot, since too many experts had certified otherwise, but he refused to rule out the possibility that it had been bioengineered in a laboratory "right here on Mother Earth."

Asked to give a Soviet view of the matter, a well-known specialist in American affairs told an interviewer on the evening news that "annelids do not have the brainpower of a bird, much less a human being." In her frank opinion, which she offered with a fetching smile, the president's worm was "a diversionary tactic on the part of Western political circles to hide the bankruptcy of their policies."

Shortly after 9:00 P.M., the president finished a long series of defense briefings and made time for her guest. On her orders, over the noisy objections of her chief of staff and the Secret Service, the worm had been given several hours of feeding and relaxation in a secluded portion of the Rose Garden. Now it was back again in its room, with the computer warm and a few discreet guards on hand to keep whatever peace needed keeping.

The president sat down at the keyboard, tired from a long day. The ad hoc advisory committee had not yet had a chance to meet, leaving her free to ask anything that seemed useful. This time she had come alone.

She gazed at the pale lavender-tinted screen and then at the worm. A swallow of very hot black coffee helped revive her.

"Let's begin," she tapped. "You go first."

The worm wasted no time. "I appreciate the courtesy. Do you think a female chief executive can command the armed forces of a nation as well as a male?"

"Of course not." Mary Louise Diorio was always exceptionally blunt on any issue of gender. "But she is likely to make a better negotiator. Each sex has its particular strengths and weaknesses, thanks to something like ten million years of primate evolution. Is there sex differentiation in your species?"

"We are all hermaphrodites, like your worms on Earth. Does your job

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prevent you from copulating frequently with your husband?"

The president arched an eyebrow. "We have a second house in Baltimore. As a rule we're together only on weekends and during vacations, so there is less opportunity for marital relations than if I were not president. When you say hermaphrodite, do you mean that you are self-fertilizing?"

"No. Each of us has a life-mate, and we reproduce by exchange of sperm. I deposit sperm in my mate's female pore, and at the same time it deposits sperm in my female pore. Why have you not reproduced?"

"I married late. When I was thirty-five and thinking of a child, my uterus had to be removed for medical reasons. The media never found out. Are you a parent yourself?"

The interview continued for another quarter hour, question following question relentlessly. The president could not find an easy way to introduce the concerns uppermost in her mind.

She broke off and laid her hand for a moment on the worm's back. She felt the faint warmth of its flesh.

"Worm," she tapped. "Instead of asking my next question, let me make a statement. I respect our bargain, and I recognize that you don't wish to interfere in terrestrial politics. But you must understand that I find it hard to concentrate."

She paused to give the worm a chance to interrupt. It entered no message.

"You have told me that the country I lead will soon by destroyed in a war. Perhaps in a few days. To talk about reproductive systems or children or daily work at such a time is impossible for me unless in return I can gain information from you that may help me prevent — or win — this war. Let us, please, change the subject."

The worm wrote nothing.

"If I stand aside and let the Soviet Union forcibly suppress the movement for reunification that has gained power in the GDR, what would happen to the odds you gave me earlier, the 95 percent probability of a world war?"

"My forecast included your decision," the worm replied. "You will not decide to stand aside. You cannot do so, because political opinion both in the two Germanies and in the United States has already carried you too far. Your government fears that if it capitulated to Soviet wishes now, the USSR would seize West Berlin and shortly thereafter find a pretext to occupy the Federal Republic as well. Do you sometimes wish that you were once again a practicing attorney in Philadelphia?"

"Never more than tonight," wrote the president. "Must we keep on playing this game of swapping questions?"

"Yes, it was our agreement. Naturally, you must ask the right questions. Did you campaign for a Senate

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seat in hopes of someday becoming the president?"

"You'd better believe it. I set my sights on the White House even before I entered state politics. Would a prompt movement of NATO troops into the GDR at Berlin's request forestall Soviet military action?"

"No, it would make such action still more probable. Have you ever consulted a psychiatrist?"

"No. Could the United Nations Security Council persuade the Soviets to agree to a NATO-Warsaw Pact congress on the German problem?"

"The USSR will continue to ignore the Security Council. Chairman Rostopchin is at the mercy of the Politburo on this issue, and he cannot back down. Do you think that human beings who seek high political office have schizoid personalities?"

"I'm not sure what a schizoid personality is, but if you mean are they hungry for power over other people and frequently out of touch with reality, I'd have to say, yes, most of them are. I don't know many self-effacing politicians, although a lot of them pretend to be. I think they live for the hallucinogenic thrills of public acclaim and submission. If they weren't such a necessary evil, I'd be ashamed to be president."

She paused to pour a second cup of scalding coffee from the ceramic urn on her hot plate, and on a hunch she decided to defer other political questions until Saturday.

"My scientific advisers tell me," she wrote, "that annelids such as yourself have no true brain and no measurable intelligence. But you seem, if anything, more intelligent than human beings. How do you explain this?"

"It is quite simple. You have the expression, 'a wolf in sheep's clothing.' I am a human being in worm's clothing. Do you find that the exercise of political power is also accompanied by any form of sexual pleasure?"

The president stared at the fat gray body of her visitor. "What do you mean, a human being?" she tapped.

There was no reply. The president remembered.

"O.K., your answer first. To tell the truth, I do sometimes feel a little twitchy when I'm delivering a major speech or running a cabinet meeting. I've never thought about it. But, please how can you be a human being in worm's clothing?"

"I sense your confusion. What you see is the result of a decision taken almost thirty million Earth years ago by my society. It was not an anthropoid society; nevertheless, I apply to it the word *human* because we were once vertebrate mammals with consciousness, empathy, and reasoning powers much like your own. Our biologists had acquired understanding and full control of the forms and processes of life. We were therefore able to select alternative bodies.

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"Some of us chose to become annelids, with a mutated dorsal brain that is eighteen to twenty centimeters long, much bigger than in any naturally occurring species. Our annelid forms are simple, efficient, and easy to replace when they wear out. But we are human, all the same.

Can you furnish supporting evidence for the theory that anthropoid societies destroy themselves because anthropoids suffer from superfluous libidinal energy, which is often diverted into aggressive behavior?"

"It's been my observation," the president quickly tapped, "that you can explain anything away with psychiatric lingo. For example, I don't know what libidinal energy is, or how you would measure it if you could isolate it. But you're right about one thing. Human beings — or, I should say, anthropoids — waste a lot of time thinking about sex. And if they repress their sex drives, maybe it just makes them nastier. I don't know."

She finished her second cup and glanced at her watch.

"My turn. We have only a few more minutes this evening. Why do you say that your bodies are easy to replace? You don't die?"

"Our minds do not die. The neural matrix is recorded and transferred to each new body in turn. Of course this procedure is always optional. Sometimes one of us chooses not to continue. Are you as libidinous or aggressive as your male counterparts among world leaders?"

"I think not. At any rate the female lidibo is more selective. Earlier, you spoke of mating for life. Where is your mate now?"

"I thought you knew," the worm wrote. "In the Kremlin with Chairman Rostopchin."

News of the Soviet worm was not released by Tass until Saturday. No attempt was made to reconcile it with the earlier statement by the smiling expert in American affairs.

Up to that point, cynics in the Western world had passed the joke from bar to bar that the aliens knew just what they were doing, sending a long, thick worm to a woman like Mary Louise. Although generally positive, her public image did not include any hint of sexual abandon. She was like everybody's well-preserved maiden aunt, the one with the straight spine who runs the local public library.

"These aliens are just trying to get her to relax and enjoy herself," an elderly patron observed in a cozy taproom in Queens. "You wait and see. Next they'll be sending the guy in the Kremlin a talking bagel."

But when the Soviets got their alien, it was a worm indistinguishable from the president's. Although at first it had almost been torched by an overly zealous security man wielding the latest in hand-held flamethrowers, by

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Saturday it was installed in a tank of black Ukrainian topsoil equipped with humidity and temperature controls, and officially welcomed to the Soviet Union by three ranking members of the Politburo.

In its initial press release, Tass reported that the worm had brought friendly greetings to the Soviet people from a highly developed socialist commonwealth in outer space. Chairman Rostopchin, the communiqué went on, looked forward to a mutually beneficial exchange of views and scientific information. He also hoped that the worm's comrade in Washington would convince President Diorio to halt her interference in the internal affairs of the peace-loving peoples of the GDR, interference "which places in grave jeopardy the future of all mankind."

It was the first official Soviet proclamation on the German reunification crisis in almost a week. The full text, when studied and demystified by experts in State, made the Secretary physically ill.

"There can't be any doubt, Madam President," he told his boss after a double brandy. "Unless we back down, we have to be prepared for a shooting war. I thought they were bluffing, but when you take Rostopchin's statement in the context of our intelligence reports on troop movements, activity at submarine bases and airfields, and deployment of ABM shields, it's pretty obvious."

President Diorio bit her lip. "I wish I could trust those damned lasersats of ours."

"They'll be 97 percent effective, or better. Everybody agrees."

"The worm doesn't."

"Have you asked it?"

"Not in so many words. I was waiting for the ad hoc committee to hand me its list of questions, but as you know, the worm did say that war was almost inevitable. It also said the war would wipe out everything north of Tasmania."

The Secretary grunted. "I have to wonder if these worms weren't developed in Russia to give us the shakes."

The president stared at him. "Knock it off, Bob. We have enough problems, without getting paranoid."

Her brief tête-à-tête with the secretary of state was part of a White House weekend more frenetic than any in living memory. The National Security Council had met in top-secret session all Saturday morning and did not break for lunch until two. Military brass, ambassadors, and State Department officials (including the Secretary) flowed in and out of the Oval Office all afternoon.

At seven the chief of staff dropped off his committee's list of questions for the worm, which the president studied until meeting her husband for a light supper in the family dining room.

Questioning the worm later that evening was a less comfortable expe-

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rience for her than it had been Friday. The chief asked to sit in to represent the committee, which she agreed made sense, but she would have preferred complete privacy. She also felt uneasy about asking questions that were not really her own. The worm could hardly tell the difference, but then again—?

The format, however, was the same. On the American side, only the president sat at the keyboard. For each question she asked, the worm posed one of its own, centering as before on anthropoid psychology.

Despite steady pressure from the president, until at last she gave up trying, the worm declined to offer advice or hint at solutions to the German crisis.

On military matters, its answers were terse.

When the president asked the ad hoc committee's jackpot question on the probable effectiveness of the U.S. lasersats (nicknamed "rea-guns" in punning tribute to the former president who had initiated the whole space-based ABM program), the worm seemed almost testy.

"Your ABM satellites armed with laser weapons will be largely nullified," it wrote, "by system-wide malfunctions and counter-ABM technologies, and what they can do. I do not wish to elaborate."

It was equally concise on strategic alternatives, expected first-strike losses, and the performance of the military command and control system after a nuclear exchange.

But when she threw away her script and delved into other matters, the worm proved more forthcoming.

"I am curious," she tapped at one point, near the end of their meeting. "You have told me about the 'implosion' of various anthropoid cultures in the Galaxy. Was there ever one that did not collapse?"

"None at all. I regret to tell you this, but we know of none. Of course the Galaxy is a big place. We have surveyed less than one-third of it."

"Yet they were all human cultures?" she pressed, after answering the worm's question on her methods of achieving orgasm.

"The word *human* is obviously an Earth word, reflecting Earth values and science. I use it perhaps differently than you. To my society, there is a change in scale from the anthropoid, or feloid, or ursoid, to the unambiguously human. A human creature is one who has shed the mammalian heritage and become an ethically responsible servant of Being, one who reveres all permutations of the world-stuff.

"My own society was originally ursoid. Bearlike. Some of us then evolved, as I explained, into sentient annelids. Others of us chose different paths. A few of our original bearfathers and bearmothers still live at home, unchanged in body. It does not matter. We are all human."

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Later still, prompted by her chief of staff, she asked the worm to describe the politics of its society.

It appeared that the term was meaningless. All worms were free to live however they pleased, and all cooperation among them was spontaneous and consensual. They worked on projects of common interest because they enjoyed working, and they worked with comrades because they enjoyed their company.

The chief of staff shook his head. "It sure as hell couldn't happen here," he said to himself.

But at the end of the evening, shortly after midnight, the worm interrupted their conversation.

"I think we must stop now," it wrote.

"Why?" asked the president.

"It is best for me to leave. I will conclude my observations from another place, off-planet. Thank you for your time."

The chief of staff wanted to restrain their guest, but the president was adamant.

"Don't be a jackass," she said. "Even if we could hold it, we couldn't force it to communicate."

"I will leave you with one final message," the worm added. "I will enter it in cipher, which a good cryptanalyst can solve in a day or so. The message will be more meaningful if you wait to read it until then."

"Will I still be alive to read it?" the president wrote.

"If you are not, it will make no sense and no difference to anyone."

The worm skipped ten lines and entered a screenful of what looked like random symbols. The president removed the printout, giving it only a cursory glance.

In front of her eyes, and the eyes of her aide, the worm's body went rigid. The gray skin changed to something hard and shiny, which reflected the overhead lights in the room.

"That's the shell it told me about," the president said in a low voice.

Moments later the worm levitated and floated noiselessly toward the nearest window. At a gesture from the president, the chief cranked it open.

Their visitor passed through and then rose, skyward, in a luminous blur.

It was hell all day Sunday in Washington. The media had by now realized that a world war was likely to break out. They did their best to inform the public without inciting riots or mass evacuations of cities. In fact there was no panic, in North America or in Europe. The only noticeable change was a sudden drying up of political humor in barrooms, and by Sunday evening a collapse of interest in the president's worm, whose abrupt departure from the White House was reported in a noontime news bulletin.

Without benefit of media cover-

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age, the Kremlin's worm also took its leave. Chairman Rostopchin had ordered its tank covered with an electric grid, but early Sunday afternoon (having completed its own interview with the chairman), it shorted the grid, slipped through, breached two walls like a cannonball, and disappeared. Tass issued no report.

The leadership quarreled bitterly over the incident. One faction supported the original decision to ridicule the American worm and say nothing about its mate. They pressed for further use of the worm's visit as a propaganda trump card. The first group, for the time being, won out.

Meetings at the highest levels continued well into the night in every major world capital, and many smaller ones.

Leaders calculated the risks of a limited land war in Europe, with or without the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The Soviet, North American, and Anglo-French space-based defense systems, in various stages of readiness and all unproven in battle, were put through exhaustive electronic tests. With each passing hour, the generals did more of the talking, the politicians less.

Japan, India, and Indonesia, in a joint declaration, threatened to sever diplomatic relations with all the NATO and Warsaw powers.

"Your war," they said, "will result in the freezing of our crops, the poisoning of our air and waters, and in time the death of millions of our people. We will not be a party in any way to this madness. We demand that you negotiate your differences at once."

President Diorio went to bed at 1:00 A.M., baffled and angry, but she could not fall asleep. She brewed a large cup of herbal tea and sat up in bed, reading and rereading the printout of her talks with the worm until half-past two.

Just as she started to nod off, something deep inside her, a chain of challenge and response as old and tough as life itself, snapped.

It was like coming to the end of a long road, and choosing to enter the rough alone, on foot, making a path for herself.

"I can do it!" she said. "Now, I can do it!"

She roused her husband to tell him the news.

Tuesday morning, six days after the president's worm was discovered on the White House lawn, the leaders of the rival superpowers met in Geneva at the headquarters of the International Red Cross. They were joined by the West German chancellor, Lise Brecht, and by Friedrich Sutter, secretary-general of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of East Germany.

Before dinnertime they had reached agreement on the principal issues in dispute.

The Federal Republic and the

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Democratic Republic would henceforth comprise one state, the German People's Federation (*Deutsche Volksbund*).

All foreign armed forces would be asked to leave by the end of August, and the *Volksbund* would renounce forever the possession of nuclear weapons or the stationing of such weapons on its soil.

The *Volksbund* would also withdraw from NATO and the Warsaw Pact and abstain in the future from political and military alliances with other states.

Finally in light of the altered strategic situation and lessons newly learned, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States of America pledged to meet within two weeks to negotiate an immediate reduction of their nuclear weapons to at most one-quarter of current megatonnage, and to devise a schedule for the prohibition of nuclear weapons altogether by the end of the decade.

At a press conference held just after the meeting, the four statespersons joined hands and raised their arms in a gesture of triumph.

Chairman Rostopchin and President Diorio, in prepared remarks, extended greetings not only to the peoples of Earth, but also to their new friends in the heavens.

The chairman acknowledged the inspiration of the example set by his extraterrestrial comrades, who had already achieved the higher stage of communist society foreseen by Marx and Lenin. The Soviet people, with the eyes of the universe upon them, had no choice but the steps taken on this world-historical day.

The president declared that seeing the matchless freedom of thought and enterprise enjoyed by Earth's alien visitors had reminded her how unthinkable it would be to sacrifice even one free human life to the dogs of war.

The journalists pressing around them clapped, and some cried.

During dessert the president showed the chairman her parting message from the worm.

"My people deciphered it early this morning," she told him.

He studied it with a smile.

"Forgive our false prophecies," the worm had written. "They were necessary to help you choose your way."

The chairman extracted a note from his vest.

"My visitor also left me something. I think you should read it."

President Diorio took the slip of paper and felt her cheeks flush with the embarrassment of joy.

"Goddamn it, Mr. Chairman," she said in a breaking voice. "We're the victims of the best reverse psychologists in galactic history."

He roared with laughter.

She read the message of her worm's mate one more time.

"Welcome," it said, "to the human race."

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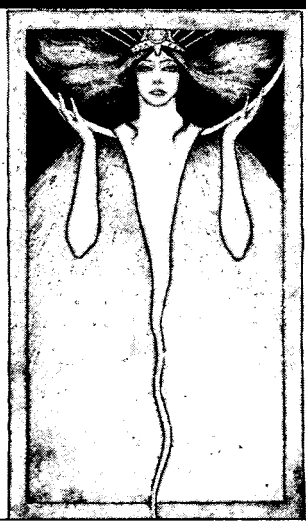

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The John W. Campbell Letters, Volume I, Edited by Perry A. Chapdelaine, Sr., Tony Chapdelaine, and George Hay, AC Projects, Inc., Rt. 4, Box 137, Franklin, TN 37064, $5.95, rack-size paper

It would be a disservice to any other book to review it in such company.

It has been fifteen years since his death, very, very quietly, in 1971. Some of you have never heard of him, and that's only natural, but it's your loss. John Wood Campbell — John W. Campbell, Jr., throughout the significant portion of his editorial career — *was* in fact the giant of whom we old-timers speak, and the figure whom we seek to immortalize.

The book compiled and edited from his letters by the Chapdelaines and George Hay is frankly just a sampler drawn from his correspondence. In the case of most other correspondents known to humankind, its over 500 pages of letter text would be more than enough to define anything anyone could conceivably be induced to know about their author. In this case, my only real quibble with the form of this immensely valuable resource is that it necessarily scratches only the surface. There are itches deep down that I would like satisfied.

I have minor quibbles, too. Embedded in a long body of introductory material and post-script, the letters then simply march on; there is

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nothing external to indicate their context, and we do not get the texts of the letters to which these were responses. I would consider this a handicap to scholarship, and it is, but when we consider that this volume is a labor of love and personal investment that has strained the producers' resources to their limits, it would be ridiculous to chide them for it.

We shall return to all that. Let me first provide a context for those who never felt the touch of Campbell's extraordinarily creative mind, nor drew great amounts of their own energy from contact with his delighted and relentless progressions into an infinity of tomorrows:

The one thing I know for sure about JWC, Jr., was that he was mechanically proficient. If it operated, he could disassemble it, grasp it, reassemble it, and probably re-design it, and possibly make it work at least as well as the original designer's intent. In the 1950s, when he was twice my age — that is, in his forties — we would sit across from each other at his desk, and when he wasn't teaching me the business directly, he was doing it indirectly by reminiscence. Among those reminiscenses were harkings-back to his days as an MIT undergraduate in Massachusetts, when he traveled to and from his New Jersey home in a Model A Ford of essentially his own devising.

You could do a lot with the basic 1930 Model A; in the town where I farmed chickens in the 1940s, almost all the tractors were Model A's with hacksawed frames and a short length of water pipe replacing the stock driveshaft. During the wartime fuel restrictions, we ran them on kerosene thinned out with various deleterious substances, and John loved hearing about this.

The thing about his Model A was not only that he had rebuilt it from the ground up, since he could afford no other course and no other form of transportation. It was in the speeds he could achieve on the Boston Post Road in icy mid-winter, and the driving techniques which, he agreed, would only fail you once.

Perhaps I have digressed. I don't think so. I know he built the car, I know he drove it, about as well as I know anything I've ever been told. I have to *assume* he was especially proud of his operating ability and took great delight in his re-engineering. It may equally well have been that when he grinned and went hah hah hah! he was celebrating not some talent unique to him but rather the universal redirectability of things.

I think it's a good bet he grasped that the world considered him remarkable. I think it's equally likely he felt the world had no idea of what ways he was actually remarkable in. But I'm not sure his ideas about himself were any more accurate than anyone else's.

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The key to his influence on SF—that is, on science fiction *and* fantasy—is that he appeared to regard ideas as free-roving entities, by nature malleable as well as mobile, and intrinsically happy to be molded. But I have gotten ahead of myself again.

While an undergraduate at the butt end of the Great Depression, Campbell became attracted to the thing being called superscience fiction; that is, to the galaxy-roaming, power-pyramiding, frankly pseudoscientific adventure fiction pioneered by Edward Elmer Smith, PhD, at the end of the Twenties. Smith's long-unpublished novel, *The Skylark of Space*, had been successfully rewritten by a female gifted amateur named Lee Hawkins Garbey (whom see in your book of SF reference notes). With that creation, and its solo successors, Smith had promulgated an explosive overturning of what had hitherto been a rather circumscribed sort of quasi-predictive genre full of consumer technology, as started by writer/publisher Hugo Gernsback not many years earlier.

Looking for some means of making ends meet, the young Campbell in the early 1930s began turning out stories all in effect titled *The Mightiest Machine*, and swiftly developed a following second only to that of "Doc" Smith himself. And it is on the reputation of the author of these stories that Campbell was eventually hired first as a junior editor, and then editor-in-chief, of a magazine called *Astounding Stories of Super Science*. This occurred not too long after his graduation from Duke University, where he had gone after failing the foreign-language requirement at M.I.T. It also coincided, more or less, with his resignation from the research laboratories of the Mack Truck Corporation, and with his marriage to Dona Stuart.*

The progression seems logical—pulp stefnist Campbell goes to a steady paycheck under the demands of family responsibility, and under pleasant circumstances, at a time when PhD's were often happy to find work washing laboratory glassware. *Astounding Stories of Super Science* beefs up its staff with a big name in the field, and looks ahead to having this expert take over all the reins as soon as he's learned the terminology and technique of editing; object, a little more

**[1] I have on earlier occasions told you the White Truck Corporation. I forget what my source was for that error. In* The Campbell Letters, *it's Mack. In any case, I'm sure he was doing the sort of mind-burningly dull repetitive work that brand-new B.S. graduates get to do—taking dynamometer readings, or the moral equivalent. [2] Dona — and that really should be typeset with a tilde over the n — was nevertheless Scottish, not Latin, in descent. A charming, brilliant woman who was the mother of Campbell's two daughters, she later divorced him and married one of his writers, George O. Smith.*

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salespower for an otherwise unrocked boat. What happened instead was that as soon as he had the chance, Campbell laid waste to super-science writing, destroying it as a sub-genre to the point where the work of "Doc" Smith reverted to that of one individual stylist who was considered as idiosyncratic, if beloved, as "Cordwainer Smith" was to be several generations later. And as if this were not enough, in the late 1930s Campbell founded *Unknown*, a newsstand fantasy magazine.

Why did he do this? Had he been incubating it all along, and if so, with malice aforethought? No one knows, and it is unlikely anyone will ever know, although the bulk of the letters — even in the present sampler — will doubtless spark an endless round of theories.

All the participants in these events are beyond interview. The stark facts are that the same issue of *Astounding* that carried an installment of *The Mightiest Machine* by the puissant John W. Campbell, Jr., had also included a relatively brief, infinitely poignant, ultimately revolutionary short story called "Twilight," by one Don A. Stuart, which story please go see (even if you think you remember it perfectly). In comparing the two texts, there can be no question but that they were written by two completely different individuals with completely antithetical views of what SF ought to be. There is in fact no doubt that both *were* written by the same man; all that remains in doubt is how such a man could be.

The career of Don A. Stuart was brief, dazzling, and marked the dawn of what, in post-World War II hindsight, was to be dubbed "modern science fiction."*

Modern science fiction — the writing in *Astounding* whose modes and themes (in *Unknown* as well) were to form the literature of a Golden Age — readily dates from the publication of "Twilight," the remainder of the body of Don A. Stuart stories, and Campbell's assumption of the full editorial mantle at *Astounding*, which swiftly became *Astounding Science Fiction*. Several admixtures remained to be contributed — the individual touches of Robert Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and A.E. van Vogt, without whom "modern science fiction" would have been detectably different —more overtly cerebral, less dramatic and less given to Jungoid archetype — but the swift nearly total doom of the favored superscience bylines was at once upon them, and the new mode reigned supreme as rapidly as editor Campbell could impose his will upon a sufficient number of fresh contributors.

**And of what would have been dubbed "modern fantasy" if* Unknown *magazine had survived the War and Campbell had continued to have this additional proscenium from which to sing in a choir of his own voices.*

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The imposition of will is what best marks an editor's degree of greatness. Almost any literary bent will find a sufficient number of readers, given time; there is nothing "inevitable" about a school of art, including that of "modern science fiction." The trick for you, the would-be editor, is to know what you want, want something that is clearly attractive, and deliver it to the readers in time to attract sufficient support before the ship goes down. To do this, you must teach writers; what you have to teach must be teachable, swiftly teachable, and addictive. You must — though in Campbell's case you are a young man with many social rough edges, startling lacunae in your esthetics, and a joltingly heterodox puritanism — over-awe not only your peers and juniors but also many of your seniors.

By those measurements, John W. Campbell, Jr., was the greatest editor SF has ever seen or is likely to see, and is in fact without question one of the major editors in all English-language literature in the middle years of the twentieth century. All about you is the heritage of what he built, or what others built in defense against the unceasing onslaught of his ideas and modes, so that they never drew breath enough to fully realize their own ambitions.

He did it in part by being able to pay more than any competitor, and to pay it swiftly, since Street & Smith was the largest and by common repute the most ethical chain publisher.* This undoubtedly gave him a great deal of initial clout, but his record ultimately is built on the discovery and cultivation of new talent, a process in which he had no equal. Cantankerous or cozening, challenging or wheedling, often apparently blundering through concepts a more sophisticated writer/editor could have described far more deftly (if he saw them), Campbell made it work. Dropping all fiction writing of his own — for whatever reason, a terrific PR ploy with his writers — Campbell made it work speedily. You may see him as the bull in the china shop, or you may see him as the Colossus of Rhodes bestriding the harbors in and out of which we traffick, but you do, you *do* see him, and his physical death was by no means the end of his life.

Before and during World War II, Campbell made the big names of SF, including some existing standbys he preserved — e.g., Clifford D. Simak and "Murray Leinster" — and some he drove into the arms of his competitors — e.g., Alfred Bester, who would

**But not necessarily the most sagacious. S&S paid Harry Bates half of what 20th-Century Fox gave them for movie rights in Bates's "Farewell to The Master," even though by contract they owned those rights entire. The offer they had accepted was, however, something like $400, and the resulting film was* The Day the Earth Stood Still.

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never have found Horace Gold, and thus would never have written *The Demolished Man*, if he had been able to accommodate to Campbellian ways. Some did not need much tuning — it is unlikely Heinlein or Van Vogt, or Hal Clement or Lester del Rey would ever have been much different, and in the case of Heinlein there are times when the writer appears to have taught the editor. Some had to be brought along with notable patience — Isaac Asimov, for one, Theodore Sturgeon for another. (I don't know much about the cases of Eric Frank Russell, A. Bertram Chandler, Raymond F. Jones or the various C.L. Moore/Henry Kuttner permutations.) Some, by the time they came along, had in effect been pretrained by their readership of the Golden Age *Astounding* — Poul Anderson, Arthur C. Clarke, James Blish, Frank Herbert, *et alia* after about 1945.

But then there is the case of L. Ron Hubbard, which casts a very interesting light on matters and raises a lot of as-yet unanswered questions.

Hubbard was a vastly popular adventure pulp writer when Campbell was an apprentice. In the introduction to his early 1980s novel, *Battlefield Earth*, Hubbard says that Street & Smith brought him in to attract readership to *Astounding*. (They also, he says, brought in his old buddy, Arthur J. Burks, but for one reason or another Burks' byline does not figure in the history of *Astounding* or of *Unknown*.)

The terms were that young editor Campbell *would*, nolens volens, buy everything these gentlemen offered him.

This Hubbardian assertion is flatly incredible to some stefnists, wrathfully so to a few. In all truth, it is not so difficult to believe when one has had some experience of being a young editor with a paternalistic publisher, and no matter how high JWC Jr. eventually flew, he was at one time a fledgling.*

But however that may have been — all relevant data, as distinguished from strong opinions, gratefully accepted c/o F&SF — Hubbard was not a stefnist, although he did know enormous amounts about how to hold a reader's attention. What he also knew a great deal about was fantasy, particularly the Arabian Nights legends, and subsequently, in addition to a spectacular career in *Astounding*, had cover story after cover story in *Unknown*, to which he contributed such acknowledged fantasy classics as *Slaves of Sleep, Typewriter in The Sky*, and "Fear."

Now this is fascinating in the light of the fact that Campbell spent his declining days selling SF as a literature of value mostly for its science-

**Old-time fan, long-time agent and editor Julius Schwartz, an SF institution, recalls that the young Campbell went to the somewhat older Mort Weisinger at Standard Magazines one 1930s afternoon and picked his brain for how to edit.*

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predictions, and in trying to sound like an ironclad technocrat even when the tech was his home-grown science of "psionics." *Unknown* remains the only magazine Campbell ever founded, and while it is notable for the manner in which it rationalizes the "rules" of magic in its stories, it was without question an out-and-out fantasy magazine.

Did Hubbard play a significant role in S&S's decision to produce *Unknown*? Did he reinforce an existing bent in Campbell? Was *Unknown* in some measure an attempt by JWC to give LRH a place to play away from ASF, and, if so, by how much and what was the strategy behind that tactic? Why, toward the end of a lifetime that included a heavy involvement with Dianetics — a lifetime that ended with an almost casual and instantly fatal heart attack — was Campbell in effect pretending that he had never been the Campbell who attempted to introduce newsstand fantasy about forty years too soon, and that some of his very best writers— Fritz Leiber, C.L. Moore, Theodore Sturgeon, Lester del Rey, not to say Hubbard — preferred *Unknown* to *Astounding*?

What I'm saying is there was a great deal more to Campbell than even his most dedicated admirers can account for, and I am one of them. I have said before of Campbell, for all that we often called him "bear-like," and the attractive Kelly Freas cover portrait for *The Campbell Letters* makes him seem benignly ursine, that when you study motion-picture film of him, as I have, what you see is a fox.

The present volume of Campbell letters will not resolve these matters. The fond prefaces and post-scripts, written by or quoting such close friends as Hay, Chapdelaine Sr., Kelly Freas and JWC's second wife, Peg— all admirable people with striking degrees of intelligence and talent— do not encompass the man. I can't imagine what could, although if this sampler floats, additional volumes of letters will appear to make the attempt.

What you get this time is hints . . . for example, two letters to Hubbard, one clearly by a very wounded junior, the other by a decisive magister who has worked out a way of getting along· a number of letters including references to Hubbard, which might revise some opinions and harden others . . . letters about or to Poul Anderson, Asimov, Blish, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Edgar Cayce, Ray Cummings, Albert Einstein, Harlan Ellison, Heinlein, Herbert, H.P. Lovecraft, Sam Moskowitz, Gene Roddenberry, E.E. Smith, George O. Smith, Donald A. Wollheim, and his eventual successor, Ben Bova, among many others.

I believe the letter to me is the only letter John ever wrote me; by then I was in Chicago, and in the PR

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business after editing Playboy Press, and I missed our long verbal interchanges across his desk in New York. I believe the only reason it's in here is because the Chapdelaines, flatteringly, wanted to add my name to the Table of Contents, for it certainly isn't a crucial communication. I have some few similar cavils, and at one time passed them on to the Chapdelaines, who quite properly ignored them as too much, too late.

As previously hinted, there is a wealth of material, and, although they received some financial help and other sorts of assistance from various sources acknowledged in the front of the book — including such diverse persons as Isaac Asimov, Lester del Rey, Forrest J. Ackerman and L. Ron Hubbard — the content of the book is theirs and Hay's alone.

It was an immense labor, and its success will only open the door on far more intensive work to come.

And in the end it will not show us all of John W. Campbell, Jr. He was his own work of art, and a work of art is inexhaustible. But we have here been done an immense service.

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George Guthridge recently sold his first SF novel and mentions that his collaborator and daughter has won state and international fiction competitions. The Guthridges live in Alaska and say that much of the material in the compelling story below is based on fact.

The Snow Coil

BY

GEORGE and MEREDITH GUTHRIDGE

My father's mukluks, which I had stuffed with grass and hung by a leather strip from a rafter of our hut, had not stopped swinging.

For forty-four days, since Father had first become lost out on the ice, the boots had not stopped moving. They turned and swung so slowly you had to stare at them a long time, not blinking, to see the movement. Mother and I thus knew he was alive, even though the other villagers had decided he was dead. As long as the boots kept moving, he was alive, somewhere.

The hut was very cold. Frost furred the ceiling, and ice coated the sealgut window. Unlike the *qasgig*, the men's house, the hut was not heated, even in winter. Only women and children slept in the huts. I had not slept in the hut for six months, until last night when the lights of the aurora had broken the heavens into ribbons of green and gold. Ghosts ride those northern lights, so I had returned home from the *qasgig* to make sure Mother was safe.

I now sat watching her soap her hair in the urine basin. She had pulled back the hood of her parka, and her face looked broad and very brown above the hood's wolverine fur. It hurt me knowing how much I missed living with her. Being a man and sleeping in the *qasgig* was not the total joy I had once thought it would be.

She looked at me as she continued massaging and shampooing her scalp. She smiled; I gazed at the earth floor.

"I know you feel I should not be washing," she said, "but life must go on, Paluknak." She knelt before the water pot and, using the ladle's ivory handle to break through the ice that

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had formed, rinsed her hair. "People are like grass," she said. "The older ones die, and others after them take their place."

"Father was not old," I said.

"No, but he was a hunter."

"The best hunter."

Again she smiled. It was a sad smile, full of love. "Yes, Paluknak, he was the best." She glanced uneasily at the mukluks. "*Is* the best," she corrected. She toweled her hair with a piece of tanhide. "And for hunters, death is always close. That is why it is so hard, out on the ice — death sometimes comes disguised as a friend."

I said nothing. For our people, silence is more meaningful than words. I picked up my spear and started sharpening the ivory tip with a stone, working slowly so she would know I was listening.

"He's been more than a hunter and provider," she went on. "Do you remember how he'd sit for hours, me in front of him with my back to him, and search my hair for lice? I'd fall asleep beneath his gentle touch. That's your father — gentle. And strong." She put down the tanhide and stood looking up toward the sunlight seeping through the sealgut window. "Leave me now, Paluknak," she said huskily. "The morning is full of memories."

I went outside. The wind was up, the ocean currents running toward the northwest, so there wasn't any sense in the men putting out the boats today. The ice had caved away from the shore and floated like a great white ridge along the horizon. Down on the beach some children were playing among the snowdrifts, tossing a sealskin ball back and forth while a couple of dogs yelped and scurried in vain to steal it. The scene depressed me. How could they be so happy and carefree while Father was still missing?

"Paluknak," said a voice behind me. "Come quickly."

I turned, startled. It was Angamachik, the dirty-faced orphan boy our village shaman had adopted before the shaman, like Father, had been lost out on the ice. Angamachik's eyes peered at me from deep within the hood of his spotted-seal parka. His gaze, dark and charged with power, penetrated me. I started to step back and lower my eyes, but stopped myself. Showing fear before a magician's adopted son can be very bad.

"The auks crazy-dance again," he said, his voice flat and emotionless. Then he turned and, motioning for me to follow, began threading between the huts and snow-covered boulders of our village.

We went partway up the mountain that is our island, then along the cliff face to the north slope, where the auks nest among the rocks. The air was alive with their cawing and squabbling. In dismay we watched several of the great gray birds swoop

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down from the heights, suddenly tuck in their wings and tumble toward the sea, then check their fall when they were just above the waves and soar upward. What might make them act so strangely I could not guess.

"One of these times they will be unable to stop their dives," Angamachik said. "They will tumble into the sea and snap their necks on the breakers."

"You know this to be true?"

I *know*." And again his eyes burned. "Something has tilted the world out of balance, Paluknak, and the birds have sensed its tipping. They tumble to free themselves from that terror. But soon their wings shall tire; they bear the burden of oncoming disaster." Folding the bulky arms of his parka, he scowled and his eyes gleamed angrily as he gazed back toward the village. "I, too, sense something terrible is approaching. But the others seem not to notice, or care." He nodded toward the cliff. "The signs are everywhere. Here, with the auks. And remember those pebble-crusted salmon Kipnuk found in the belly of that beluga whale he harpooned? And lately, the auroras . . ."

Yes, the auroras. Stand outside and whistle in mockery during a light-storm, and those ghost-lights may fly down and cut off your head. The sky had been wild with them the night after Father had gone out onto the ice to hunt walrus and had not returned. Since then the auroras have danced ever brighter and more terrifying.

"Why will they not listen to me, Paluknak!" Angamachik's voice, usually so cold and quiet, suddenly sounded shrill. "Can they not feel that calamity is about to occur? Do they not remember that if the earth tips too much, the daylight will wash back into the sun and never again flood forth?"

I looked into the dark recess of his hood and saw a face filled with fear.

"They are fools," he said.

"Were you already a shaman, they would heed your warnings."

"I am a shaman's son!"

"If only Father were here. He respected you. He would listen. Then they'd listen."

"Your father is dead, Paluknak. Stop dwelling on the past. Help the living."

"He lives. His mukluks say so!"

"The mukluks lie. The wind moves them, nothing more. Your house is drafty."

I shook my head. "Father and I chinked the walls last summer. Every crack, stuffed with grass and mud."

He took hold of my shoulders and looked at me sadly. His eyes were those of a friend. "The wind," he said.

When Angamachik's father, the shaman, had disappeared, we also had hung mukluks. The shaman's boots

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had stopped swinging the next morning; dead.

"No one has lasted out on the ice more than five or six days," Angamachik said. "Forty-four days? No. Impossible. Accept it, Paluknak."

I did not reply. I looked away, toward the sea.

Then I saw the boat.

It was small and dark, moving between a break in the ridged ice. I raced down the slope to the shore and, shielding my eyes with my mittened hand, squinted against the glare of sunlight upon the water. The boat grew larger and larger.

"Too big for a kayak," I said as Angamachik came up alongside me.

"It's not of any sort I've seen before," he said.

"An umiak, from one of the mainland villages? You see?" I pointed. "Several rowers are aboard. Perhaps they're bringing Father back!"

"The bow's too narrow for the boat to be an umiak," he said. Then, his voice chilled: "A dog-creature's boat."

My heart stopped for an instant, then began pounding. The terror I felt must have been the same the auks had known.

Onward and onward the boat came, and now our people spilled from their huts and ran along the slope to the north shore. Word of the alien boat had spread unspoken, like a wind. None of us had ever seen one of the white men who hunted whales and walrus and who sometimes visited mainland villages, but ideas abounded concerning their origin. Most, like Angamachik, said they were the offspring of evil people who had married with dogs. Some, like Father, suggested they were men like ourselves, except that the warm seas of the south had bleached away their natural color. Whatever the case, their presence had been like a nightmare retold by its dreamer: interesting and amusing but only slightly frightening. Until now.

The other villagers gathered around us. Mother looked at me, and I put my hand on her sleeve to steady her. I hoped she would not notice that I, too, was trembling.

A man stood up in the bow as the boat nosed toward shore. "I am Kayco," he shouted, "from the village of Annaqarq. I bring white friends, come to trade."

As the bow nudged the shore, the steersman stood and moved forward between the rowers. He stepped around the one called Kayco, jumped onto the snow, and pulled the boat up. Then, lowering his parka hood, he turned and faced us, grinning. Even his eyes seemed to grin. Almost as one person, we gasped and stepped back. His skin, pasty-looking, was pale as death. His hairy chin indeed resembled the jowls of a dog.

"This man is called Captain," said Kayco as he climbed down. "Beyond the ice he commands a boat as big as

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five houses, with sails the height of mountains." He helped the rowers unload several bundles. the men opened the blankets and lay items upon the snow. "Captain brings flour and metal knives and trade goods from hot-weather islands to the south," Kayco went on, beaming with pride.

Our people looked at the fat and glittering gifts upon the snow, then rushed to the village to gather things of equal value. Captain, however, turned out not to be interested in our spears and harpoons and fishhooks and nets of the island's finest fibers. Kayco sent us back for ivory and furs —less precious things, certainly, but items we would need for hunting and for winter.

I, too, traded, and foolishly. My fox skins went for dance beads for Mother; my ivory for something Kayco called *banana*. Its skin tasted horrible, but I ate it anyway. I gave my only polar bear hide for *mirror,* which captured my face each time I looked at it. During the trade, I imagined I could somehow use *mirror* to capture foxes and wolves as it had captured me, but I immediately realized the idea was childish. The excitement of trading and the fear of the white men had stolen my reason.

Others also traded poorly. Some for *matches,* which worked only once. Some for *salt,* which proved to be but the sea without water. Some gave all their furs for sacks called *flours*. They dumped out the white stuffing within the sacks and went happily home; only later did we learn that the stuffing, now blown away by the wind, was the *flours,* which, mixed with water, could be cooked and eaten.

Evening came early, cloudy but calm. After I hid *mirror* in the men's house, I returned to the north shore. Kayco and the white men had gone back to the larger boat beyond the ice, but promised to return in the morning. I felt sad and exhausted. I watched the sea and listened to the waves and wind, but their voices could not quiet my unhappiness.

Though warm within my parka, I started trembling. I could not control myself.

The first time such shivering had seized me was one summer when the other boys had asked me to go swimming in the shallow depression in the mountain's flat top. I had swum there before, but suddenly the thought of diving into that frigid water had made me quiver. Since then the fear sometimes gripped me after I had been out in the boat all day. I would gaze across the waves and suddenly start shivering. It was a terrible feeling; I had not even told Father about it. Respect the sea, he had taught me, and it will give you fish and furs; tremble before it, and you will drown trembling.

Since his disappearance the fear came almost daily.

I slapped at my upper arms and

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sides, trying to increase circulation. The trembling continued.

"Cold, Paluknak?" Angamachik came up beside me.

"No, I. . . ."

He looked at me closely, then, quickly removing a mitten, put his hand inside my hood, next to my cheek. "You're sweating, my friend, and you look flushed. Are you ill?"

My eyes betrayed me.

"Frightened," he said. He glanced toward the sea. "Well, so am I. The dog-men are evil." He put his arm across my shoulders. "And I, Angamachik — alone, if necessary — shall stop them. Look." He pointed toward the shore.

There, stepped out in the snow, was a footprint coil. To make one, you walk in an ever-decreasing spiral, always to the left. Usually, to fool your friends, you then walk backward, careful not to make new prints. It looks as if you've disappeared. A child's game — but not always for children.

Sometimes you *do* disappear. Friendly spirits snatch you from the coil's center and fly you to the top of the mountain. I've never seen it done, but they say that in the old days it was common.

Back then, snow designs were more important to us than they are now. We are a people who like beautiful things, and who make beautiful things. Ivory carvings, wood carvings, stone carvings, beadwork, dance clothing. For me, designs in the snow are the loveliest. Like our people, they grace the ground for a short time, then are quickly erased by the elements. People treat them as a child's game now, but my father used to tell me how they once were considered among our greatest creations.

Whoever had created this snow coil had done so with care and love, each footprint precisely placed, each spiral an equal distance from the others. "I made that," Angamachik said. "I thought that if I did it right, I could fly upward and the spirits would advise how best to destroy the whites."

"The spirits lifted you?" I asked, awed.

He gazed at the ground. "Not this time. But soon. The spirits will teach me how to kill the whites. Then they'll listen."

"Who will listen?" I asked. "Our people, or the spirits?"

"Both. When I kill the whites, all will know the power of Angamachik."

He strode back toward the village. As I watched him go, my shivering suddenly increased. How my friend could speak so easily of murder dumbfounded me. Violence is not the way of our people. But now, since the world had tipped . . .

The clouds parted. I started walking backward, ever more quickly, as green and gold ribbons of light wavered across the sky. The colors pulsed and flickered until the night was

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awash with auroras. The spirits were laughing . . . laughing at me, surely! Laughing at the foolish, trembling, fatherless boy!

My shivering turned to anger. I shook my fist at the spirits. You ghost-lights, who have laughed every night since Father disappeared! You, who play across the sky while the world tips! You, who would teach my friend Angamachik to violate human law!
I whistled in mockery as loudly as I could.

And wheeled and ran, crunching through the snow.

The lights spun down, furling and whipping around me. A green and gold whirlpooling wind surrounded me, buffeting my parka. Mad voices laughed and cried in my ears.

I dived toward a boulder, hoping to hide.

The lights swooped after me. Snow flew up. What felt like cold, clammy hands touched my cheeks, then seized my throat. I screamed and slapped at the lights, desperately looking toward the village. Mother! Help me!

The village was further away than before! Somehow I'd gotten turned around. I had run the wrong way!

Before me was Angamachik's footprint coil.

The auroras flew away for a moment, then came rushing and swirling back, shrieking and cackling. No way could I fight off this new attack. The spirits would choke me and cut off my head. Then who would hunt and fish for Mother?

I stepped into the coil, careful not to make new prints. Maybe Angamachik's power would save me. Maybe the auroras wouldn't go where a shaman's son had walked. Maybe the coil held power, but the gods had frowned at Angamachik's anger and hatred.

I reached the coil's center.

The ghost-lights followed me. Their spirit colors wound around my throat like a too-tight scarf. I struggled, gasping.

Suddenly, warm and invisible hands lifted me.

Flying!

Up, up toward the mountaintop I soared. Around me the auroras rippled and furled as they searched for me. Below, the village grew ever smaller.

Then the mountaintop was also below me.

Set me down! In anguish I batted at the invisible hands.

Air. Only air. I felt nothing.

The mountaintop spun away below me and was lost in thrashing light. The sky was ablaze as I passed above the auroras. Below was a sea of beribboned light beneath sparkling stars.

The unseen hands released me.

I fell sideways, landing with a huff on a circular patch of brown. I sat up, trying to catch my breath, anxious with fear. Blues, yellows, greens, golds churned around me, waves against a beach. I was on some kind of tiny is-

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land amid the auroras. The ghosts howled from within the waves. But were they wailing from anger for my having escaped them, or delight for my being imprisoned on the island?

I rose and squinted across the sea of light. Through the silvery dimness I could see another island. A figure in a bearded-seal parka stood and started waving his arms. His parka hood was thrown back, and his black hair shone in the starlight.

"Hello the other island!" the man called.

"Father?" I cried out. "Is it you?"

"Paluknak?"

"Yes, Father, yes!" I screamed. My face was hot with excitement, and I began jumping up and down in joy.

Father stretched out his arms and started dancing like a bear. "Forty-four days, alone," he shouted. "And now my son comes to me!"

Then the waves sloshed near my feet, and my heart sank. My father, so close . . . yet so far. The spirit-sea separated us.

"I'll swim to you," he called.

He began stripping off his parka.

"Have you weapons and food?" I called.

He waved his hand. "A little food. And my spear." He lifted it.

"Then I'll come to you, Father."

It wasn't just the weapons and food, though, that made me want to attempt the crossing. Nor the thought of being with Father. The trembling had again seized me. If I feared the sea more than I loved my father, then I wasn't fit to be called a man. I wasn't fit to sleep in the *qasgig* . . . if we ever reached home again.

Got to be brave, I told myself as I took off my parka to test the spirit-sea. I placed the coat in the waves. The sealskin gleamed as watery green light cascaded over it.

When I withdrew the coat, it was as dry and cold as death. I shuddered.

Be brave.

Hugging my parka, I dived among ghosts. I started to feel sick as the cold and clammy light engulfed me, but then I realized I was floating and I opened my eyes. The coat helped buoy me up. I splashed forward through varicolored currents. *Go back, ghost voices sang and whispered. Or else give in to your fear, and let yourself drown.*

My arms grew tired. My legs began to ache. The more I thrashed onward, the farther Father's island seemed to be. Wavelets of freezing light washed over me. The cold pierced me. I became numb. My whole body cried out in pain. How much farther? How much farther?

I lifted my head between waves and saw that Father was as distant as ever. I groaned.

Let yourself drown, Paluknak. We auroras will shelter you.

I kicked and stroked forward. My blood felt frozen. I couldn't make it. I couldn't. I took another stroke. Couldn't go any farther. Another

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stroke. Another.

Then hands were beneath my arms, and they were not the hands of ghosts. Father pulled me onto his island. I sputtered, coughing, and smiled up at him smiling down. He held my head against his chest and rocked me as though I were yet a babe. "My Paluknak, come to me after forty-four days," he said.

When I sat up, I was trembling, but not from fear. I was trembling from exhaustion. I was very happy. The spirit-waves tossed and crashed against the tiny island's shore, perhaps angry that I had escaped the sea.

"We feared you were dead, Father," I told him as I put on my parka, "but Mother and I never believed it. Not for a moment."

He smiled. One of his front teeth was broken, and his smile seemed to go back into his mouth. He looked gaunt. The skin was taut against his cheekbones, like when Mother is sewing and her bone needle is about to pop through the leather.

"I was out on the ice, but there were no walrus," he said. "I decided to walk back to the north shore and climb up after auk eggs. I went up and up — lots of eggs. Then night fell, and the auroras swooped down. I was closer to the top of the mountain than the shore, so I climbed up the rest of the way, trying to find a place to hide. But you know how it is up there, just that shallow place you boys swim in; not even any boulders to hide against. In desperation I made a footprint coil, thinking the friendly spirits might deliver me back down to the beach." He glanced around. "Instead I ended up here."

Then he said, "The auroras sure have been acting up lately. Every night this light-sea storms."

"Angamachik says the world has tipped," I told him. He nodded knowingly when I explained about the white men. Then I told him about my friend's vow to kill them. Father's eyes narrowed with anger.

"It is not the whites Angamachik fears," he said. "He fears change. He fears he won't be important when he's a shaman, that our people won't look to him for answers. Learn from the whites, and we will have the knowledge of two cultures. Follow Angamachik's way, and we will have nothing." He looked across the sea. "Somehow we must find a way home, my son, before Angamachik destroys our people."

"But how?" I asked.

"I made a footprint coil, and was flown up here," he said. "You did the same. Always up. Now, to get back down . . ."

I looked at his loving eyes and saw the answer.

"Reverse the coil," I said.

He grinned and took my mittened hand. "A good son, and a smart son. Follow my footsteps, Paluknak."

I sat behind the circle of elders in

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the hut. Mother had lit her extra seal-oil lamps, and the interior was filled with shadows and warm, homey smoke. Father was closest to me, drawing on a tanhide with a piece of charcoal. Next to him sat Captain, smoking a bowl pipe and watching the drawing studiously. Sometimes Kayco would interrupt, jabbering in the ugly language the whites speak. Captain would nod and point to the drawing.

Father was showing where Captain could and could not hunt. We would not lose our hunting grounds. We would not starve. Father would see to that; each time Captain's boat came here, Father himself would be allowed aboard, to help Captain get walrus and whale. In exchange, we would receive food and metal harpoon heads and blankets and wood for our homes. No more foolish trading, I looked across the room, and Mother smiled from her place in the corner, near the lamp. Her husband was home, and her son a man. No auks crazy-danced anymore; and when the auroras did storm, they were gentle light-storms: happy storms.

Next to her shone the sealgut window. A dark figure loomed outside, obviously trying to peer within. I went to the door.

It was Angamachik. His face was cloudy, and the power was gone from his eyes.

"Can I come in and watch?" he asked.

"Father said no," I told him. "But someday you'll understand and you, too, shall be an elder. Both of us, my friend. Soon."

Coming soon

Next month: October is our 37th anniversary issue, featuring new stories by **James Tiptree, Jr., Lucius Shepard, Frederik Pohl, Robert Holdstock, Reginald Bretnor** and **Avram Davidson.** Also in the October or November issues: **Ron Goulart, Karen Joy Fowler, Gerald Jonas, David Brin** and **John Brunner.**

In short, a lot of fine stories by the top names in SF are upcoming in the next few months. The October issue is on sale August 30. Or use the coupon on page 88.

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In which Douglas Leckesh, rich, dying, desperate, searches for a kind of immortality and finds it . . .

Soft Death

BY

RUDY RUCKER

I'm sorry, Mr. Leckesh," said the doctor, nervously tapping on his desk screen. "There's no doubt about it. The tests are all positive."

"But surely . . ." began Leckesh. His voice came out as a papery whisper. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I mean . . . can't you put a new liver in me? I can afford the organ, and I can afford the surgery. My God, man, don't just sit there and tell me you're *sorry!* What am I paying you for?" At the mention of money, Leckesh's voice regained its usual commanding tone.

The doctor looked uncomfortable. "I *am* sorry, Mr. Leckesh. The cancer has metastasized. Tumor cells are established in every part of your body." He fingered some keys, and green lines formed on his screen. "Step around the desk, Mr. Leckesh, and look at this."

It was the graph of an upsloping curve, with dates along the horizontal axis, and percentages along the vertical axis. The graph was captioned: PROJECTED MORTALITY OF DOUGLAS LECKESH.

"These are my odds of dying by a given date?" barked Leckesh. What a fool this doctor was to let a computer do all his thinking. "You've got this all projected like some damned commodities option?"

"Most patients find it reassuring to know the whole truth," said the doctor. "Today is March 30. You see how the curve rises? We have a 50 percent chance of your death before May 1, a 90 percent chance before July 1, and virtual certainty by late September. You can trust these figures, Mr. Leckesh The Bertroy Medical Associates have the best computer in New York."

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"Turn if off," cried Leckesh, smacking the screen so hard that its pixels quivered. "I came here to see a doctor! If I wanted to look at computer projections, I could have stayed in my office down on the Street!"

The doctor sighed and turned off his terminal. "You're experiencing denial, Mr. Leckesh. The fact is that you're going to die. Make the most of the time you have. If you want a non-computerized projection, I'll give you one." The doctor stared briefly at the cityscape outside his window. "Don't expect much more than three weeks before your final collapse."

Leckesh found his way out of the Bertroy Building and into the morning roar of Madison Avenue. It was 10:30. He had business meetings, but what difference would more millions make now? At least he should call Abby; she'd be waiting to hear. But once he told Abby, she'd only get right to work planning her own future. If he, Doug Leckesh, was the one doing the dying, why should he do anything for anyone anymore? Abby could wait. Business could stop. Right now he wanted a drink.

The weather was raw and blustery, with a little snow in the air. The sky was fifty different shades of gray. One of the new robot taxis slowed invitingly as Leckesh approached the curb. He owned stock in the company, but today of all days, he didn't feel like talking to a robot. He waved the cab off and kept walking. His club was only four blocks off.

There was a bar at the next corner, apparently non automated. Leckesh hadn't entered a public drinking place for years, but a sudden gust of cold wind urged him in. He ordered a beer and a shot of scotch. The bartender looked sympathetic; Leckesh had a sudden flash that someone with cancer came in here every day. There were lots of doctors in the Bertroy Building. There were lots of people with cancer. There were lots of people who handled stress with alcohol.

"I'm ready for spring," observed the bartender when Leckesh ordered his second round. He was a broad-faced Korean with a New Jersey accent. "I got a garden up on the roof, and I'm dying to put the seedlings in."

"What do you grow?" asked Leckesh, thinking of his father. Papa had put a garden in the back of their little tract home every summer. *This is living, Dougie,* Papa would say, picking a tomato and biting into it. *This is what it's all about.*

"Lettuce," said the flat-faced Korean. "Bok choy. Potatoes. I love new potatoes, the way they come up in a big clump of nuggets."

Leckesh thought about nuggets. Tumor cells in every part of his body. He sucked down his scotch and asked for another.

"The main thing is fertilizer," said the bartender, placidly pouring out a shot. "Plants need dead stuff, rot-

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ten stuff, all crumbly and black. It's the cycle of nature. Death into life."

"I'll be dead in a month," said Leckesh. The words jumped out. "I just saw my doctor. I have cancer all over my body."

The Korean stopped moving and looked into Leckesh's eyes. Just looked, for a long few seconds, watching him like a TV. "You scared?"

"I'm not religious," said Leckesh. "I don't think there's anything after death. Three more weeks and it's all over. I might as well never have lived."

"You got a wife?"

"Ah, she won't miss me. She'll *talk* about missing me. She likes to put on a show. But she won't really miss me. She'll take all my money and find someone else, the little tramp." Speaking so unkindly about Abby gave Leckesh a perverse and bitter satisfaction.

The Korean kept watching him in that blank, judicious way. "You have a lot of money?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I do," said Leckesh, regaining his composure. "Not that it's any of your business. What's your name, anyway? I'll buy you a drink. Take it all out of this and keep the change," He threw a two-hundred-dollar bill on the bar.

"My name's Yung. I'm not supposed to drink on duty, but . . ." The Korean glanced impassively around the bar. There were a couple of old longhairs having coffee in the booths, but that was it. "Yeah, I'll take a Heineken."

"That's a boy, Yung. Get me one, too. Nothing but the best for Douglas Leckesh. I'm full of nuggets. You can call me Doug. I was thinking before, you must get a lot of death cases in this bar, being so close to the Bertroy Building. It's all doctors in there, you know."

"Oh yeah," said Yung, opening the two bottles of Heineken. He poured his into a coffee mug. "Bertroy Medical Associates. They have a teraflop diagnostic computer in the basement there — it does a trillion calculations a second, fast as a human brain. My sister helps program it. She's a smart girl, my sister Lo." He sipped at his mug and watched Leckesh some more. "So you gonna die and you think that's it, huh, Mr. Leckesh?"

"Religion's wrong, Yung, isn't it?" Leckesh was feeling his drinks. "When I was your age, I didn't think so — hell, I even used to paint pictures. But down on the Street, nothing counts but numbers. I've got a seat on the Exchange, you know that? So don't try and tell *me* about religion."

Yung looked up and down the bar and leaned close. "Religion's one thing, Mr. Leckesh, but immortality's something else. Lo says immortality's no big problem anymore." He drew a business card out of his pocket and handed it to Leckesh. "This is modern; this is digital. Whenever you're

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ready for immortality, my sister Lo's got it."

Leckesh pocketed the card without looking at it. All of a sudden the beers and the three scotches were hitting him hard. The dull throb of his sick liver was filigreed with accents of acute pain. He was stupid to be drinking this early in the day, drinking and slobbering out his soul to a Korean bartender. Where was his self-control? Stiff-legged, he stalked into the men's room and made himself throw up. Better. He washed his face, first with hot and then with cold. He gargled and drank water from the tap. *Three weeks,* the doctor had said. *Three weeks.* Leckesh left the bar and went home to Abby.

Abby Leckesh was a dark-haired women with full cheeks and beautiful teeth. When they'd met, fifteen years ago, Leckesh had been fifty, and Abby thirty. He'd still dreamed of being a painter, even then, and he'd liked the bohemian crowd that Abby traveled in. But now Leckesh hated Abby's friends with an aging man's impotent jealousy.

To his displeasure, Abby greeted the news of his impending death with what he took for enthusiasm. She believed in spirits and mediums, and she was confident that Leckesh would be able to contact her from beyond the grave.

"Don't be downcast, Doug. You'll only be moving to a higher plane of existence. You'll still be here with me, as a dear familiar spirit."

"Talk about a fate worse than death," snapped Leckesh. "I don't want to float around watching you spend my money on your boyfriends." For years now, he'd suspected her of being unfaithful to him.

"I'll wear full mourning for six months," prattled Abby, ignoring his accusation. "I'll go out and buy some black dresses today! And we must have Irwin Garden over for tea. He's simply the most brilliant new medium in America. You should get to know his vibrations so he can contact you on the other side."

Leckesh didn't dignify this with an answer. Abby went out in search of mourning clothes and Mr. Garden, while the robomat made Leckesh a veal cutlet for lunch. The meal cleared his head entirely, and he drew out the business card that the Korean bartender . . . Yung . . . had given him.

SOFT DEATH, INC.
Scientific Soul Preservation
and Transmission
Strictest confidentiality—
Call for an estimate today!
Lo Park
B-1001 Bertroy Bldg. 840-0190

Leckesh studied the card for a while, and made his decision. He'd be damned if he was going to let one of

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Abby's phony mediums get away with pretending to talk to his spirit. If there was anything to this "Scientific Soul Preservation," he'd be able to steal a march on the table-rappers. He picked up the phone and called the Soft Death number.

"Hello, this is Lo Park," Her accent was as pure New Jersey as Yung's, though with a hint of Eastern melody.

"Hello, this is Doug Leckesh. A man — I believe it was your brother —gave me a business card with your name on it. Soft Death Incorporated?"

"Oh yes, Yung told me. I don't like to discuss this on the telephone. Could you come see me tomorrow morning, Mr. Leckesh?"

"Ten o'clock?"

"That will be fine."

Feeling strangely relieved, Leckesh stretched out on the couch and fell asleep. He dreamed of colors, clouds of color around a long line of precise, musical tones — binary tones chanted by Lo Park's musical voice. When he awoke, it was late afternoon, and Abby was sitting across the room drinking tea with a balding young man in glasses.

"This is Mr. Garden, Doug. He's the medium I was telling you about."

Garden smiled shyly and shook Leckesh's hand. "I'm sorry to hear of your illness, Douglas," He had gentle eyes and large, moist lips. "You have very interesting vibrations."

"So do you," said Leckesh curtly. The thought of Garden alone in a dark room with Abby made him sick. "You have the vibrations of an ambulance-chasing lawyer, mixed in with the aura of a two-bit Casanova and the emanations of a snake-oil salesman. Get out of my apartment."

Garden gave a low bow and left. Abby was quite angry.

"It's fine for you, Doug, to act like that. Soon you'll be dead. But I'll be here all alone, with no one to take care of me." Tears ran down her big cheeks. "Irwin Garden only wants to help me contact your spirit."

"Let me worry about my spirit, Abby. Can't you see that Garden wants to cheat me and seduce you? I don't want jackals sniffing around my deathbed. I want to pass on in peace. Business as usual!" His liver hurt very much.

Abby sobbed harder. The fact was that she was very devoted to Leckesh. All her talk of mediums and mourning clothes was just a way to avoid thinking about his death. After a few minutes she calmed herself and kissed him on the forehead. "Of course, Doug. I'll do as you wish. I won't see Mr. Garden again." In his embittered state, Leckesh was convinced that Abby was lying. He'd never caught her yet, but he was sure she had boyfriends. How could she not? He'd been part artist when he'd wooed her, but since then he'd joined the Stock Exchange. How could Abby still love him? Well, now it didn't matter.

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The long game was almost over. And if there was anything to these Soft Death people, Leckesh was on the brink of a whole new existence.

The next morning he was back at the Bertroy Building. Lo Park's office was in the basement; it was one of a number of small cubicles partitioned off along one wall of a room-sized computer installation. To all appearances, Lo worked as a programmer here. There was nothing about "Soft Death" on her flimsy office door. Leckesh wondered if he should bother going in, but the thought of outflanking Abby's occultist manipulations goaded him on.

The Korean woman at the desk was young and slender, with hair so dark as to appear almost blue against her yellow skin. She looked up with a quick smile.

"Mr. Leckesh? Yung told me about you."

"He told you I'm rich, dying, and desperate, I suppose. What kind of immortality are you selling, Lo? And what's the price?"

"The price is high. The immortality is software."

"What do you mean?"

"Consider, Mr. Leckesh. The human body changes almost all its atoms every seven years or so. But you feel you are the same person as you were seven, or fourteen, of fifty-six years ago. What is constant in your body is the arrangement of cells, especially the cells of the brain. The real essence of *Douglas Leckesh* is not the seventy-five kilograms of diseased flesh that sits here. The essence of Douglas Leckesh is to be found in the pattern that your brain codes up. Do you follow?"

Leckesh nodded approvingly. "I was afraid you'd be another spiritualist. You're saying that my so-called soul is really just a pattern of digital information?"

"Exactly. Abstractly speaking, the information pattern exists even in the absence of a body. Yet for the pattern to be in any sense *alive,* it needs some kind of substrate." She smiled and gestured beyond her office door. "The Soft Death substrate is that computer out there If you wish, I can extract the entire software information pattern from your body and code it into the machine."

"How do I know you can really do it? And what would it feel like to live inside a computer's memory?"

"Before we continue, Mr. Leckesh, I need a commitment from you. For various reasons, the full work of Soft Death is not legally sanctioned. I cannot put my earlier clients at risk without some proof of your sincerity."

"You're saying you want a check?"

"I want a document granting us title to approximately half of your properties and investments." She slid a legal paper across the desk. "I've taken the liberty of drawing it up."

Leckesh scanned down the con-

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tract with a practiced eye. Soft Death Inc. had worked fast: half his assets were listed here, nearly a billion dollars worth. In return for the billion, Soft Death was promising Leckesh "hospice care and advanced embalming services."

"We can't make the contract more specific, Mr. Leckesh, again because of the legal sanctions on certain aspects of our operation."

Leckesh shrugged. Perhaps this was a con. But what was the difference anymore? If Soft Death didn't get this billion, Abby would give it to the Mr. Gardens of the world. He could feel the cancer deep in his guts; he could feel the growing of the pain. "I'll sign."

Lo pushed a buzzer, and a man came in to witness and notarize the document. Another blue-haired Korean. They reminded Leckesh of Smurfs.

"Your brother, too?" asked Leckesh, smiling a little. Signing away this money felt good. What was that old Bible story about the rich man trying to squeeze through a needle's eye?

"No," said Lo. "A cousin." She locked the contract in her desk. "And now you'll want to see a proof that our process works. Do you remember William Kaley?"

"Bill Kaley? Yes, I knew him rather well. We did business together. He died last fall, I believe. He was one of the most materialistic men I ever knew. Are you telling me . . ."

"Here," said Lo, punching a code into her telephone and handing Leckesh the receiver. "You can talk to him."

At first Leckesh heard only pips and bleats, but then there was a ringing, and a voice.

"Hello? Kaley here."

"Bill? This is Doug Leckesh. Do you know what day it is?"

"It's March 31, Doug. Are you dead, too?"

"Damn near. Are you really inside that computer?"

"Sure am. It's not bad. There's a lot of information coming in. I'm managing most of the investments I signed over to Soft Death, which keeps me busy. There's a pretty good gang of people in here."

"Any landscape?"

"It's not like that, Dougie. But you'd be surprised how much fun pushing around the bits can be. How soon are you coming in? I'm a little lonely for a new voice, to tell you the truth." He sounded almost wistful. "But hell, it beats being dead. When are you coming in?"

"We haven't worked that out yet." Was this real? Leckesh paused, trying to remember something that would convince him he was *really* talking to the software of William Kaley. That Schattner deal! "Do you remember the Schattner takeover, Bill?"

"Do I! Don't tell me the SEC finally found out."

"No, no, I'm just checking. Re-

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member the night after Schattner shot himself, and you and I'd made 12 million bucks? Do you remember what we had for dinner?"

"We went to McDonald's. The check was twelve dollars. We laughed our asses off. *I could eat a million of these.* Oh, it's me in here, Doug, don't worry,"

Leckesh smiled. "I'm not worried now, Bill. See you soon." He hung up and looked at Lo. "When do we start?"

"Let me outline the procedure. To extract your software, we need to get five kinds of maps of your brain: symbolic, metabolic, electrical, physical, and chemical. Taken together, these data sets are sufficient to produce an isomorphic model of your mental processes. You should begin working on the symbolic map today."

"What do you mean? I thought *you* would do the work."

"Only you know your own symbol system, Mr. Leckesh." Lo took a device the size of a cigarette pack out of her desk. It had two little grills, for microphone and speaker. "We call this a lifebox. Basically, I want you to tell it your life story. Tell everything. It takes most people a couple of weeks."

"But . . . I'm no writer."

"Don't worry; the lifebox has prompts built into its program. It asks questions." She flicked a switch and the lifebox hummed. "Go on, Mr. Leckesh, say something to it."

"I . . I'm not used to talking to machines."

"What are some of the first machines you remember, Doug?" asked the lifebox. Its voice was calm, pleasant, interested. Lo nodded encouragingly, and Leckesh answered the question.

"The TV, and my mother's vacuum cleaner. I used to love to watch the cartoons Saturday morning—Bugs Bunny was the best — and Mom would always pick that time to vacuum. It made red and green static on the TV screen." Leckesh stopped and looked at the box. "Can you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Doug. I want to build up a sort of network among the concepts that matter to you, so I'm going to keep asking questions about some of the things you mention. I'll get back to the vacuum cleaner in a minute, but first tell me this: What did you like best about Bugs Bunny?"

For the next couple of weeks, Leckesh took his lifebox everywhere. He talked to it at home and in the club — and when Abby and his friends reproved him for ignoring them, he began talking to it in a booth at Yung's bar. The lifebox was the best listener Leckesh had ever had. It remembered everything he told it, and it winnowed the key concepts out of all his stories. Leckesh would respond to its prompts, or simply go off on tangents of his own. Except for the dizziness and the constant pain, he hadn't had so much fun in years.

Finally, in mid-April, the lifebox

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said, "Now *that's* a story I've heard before, Doug. And so was the last one. And, unless I'm mistaken, you're about to tell me about the first time you slept with Abby."

"You're right," said Leckesh, feeling a little twinge of guilt. Telling his life had made him remember how big a part of him Abby really was. And now, for two weeks, he'd been too busy with the lifebox to even look at her.

"Abby, Summer, Maine, Fourth of July, Firecrackers, Cans, Pineapple, Aunt Rose, Roses, Abby, Skin, Honey, Hexagons . . . I think we've got enough to go on now, Doug. Why don't you bring me on over to Lo's. I've signaled her to expect us."

Leckesh nodded to Yung and walked over to the Bertroy Building. It was a beautiful spring day at last, with the endless blue sky leaping up from the spaces between the big city buildings. Six shades of blue, if you looked carefully. He hadn't been able to tell the lifebox much about colors.

Lo was all smiles. "You've done a good job with the lifebox, Mr. Leckesh. That's one of the most important steps. Now, what the lifebox program has done is to arrange some ten thousand of your key concepts into a kind of tree-diagram. The next step is to correlate this concept network with your brain's metabolic activity. Please come this way."

Leckesh followed Lo across the computer room to the elevators. They rode up to a neurologist's office on the top floor. There was a nice view out the top halves of the windows; the bottom halves were frosted glass. The neurologist and his nurses were, of course, Korean. Working quickly, they injected Leckesh with something, and laid him out on a table, with his head inside a large, domed sensor device.

"This is a PET-scanner, Mr. Leckesh," explained the doctor. "We want to learn just which parts of your brain react to the key concepts of your life story." The injection made Leckesh feel both stunned and lively. He couldn't move, but his mind was going a mile a minute. The PET-scan sensor seemed like a cavern, a door into the underworld. The doctor set the lifebox down on Leckesh's chest, and the box began its rapid-fire rundown.

"Machine. TV. Vacuum cleaner. Bugs Bunny. Rudeness. Teeth. Dogs . . ." After each word or phrase, the PET-scanner would click. The process went on for the whole afternoon. ". . . Pineapple. Cans. Firecrackers. Fourth of July. Maine. Summer. Abby." Finally it was over. The doctor injected an antidote; Leckesh's body speeded back up, and his mind slowed back down. Lo took him downstairs to her cubicle. The long afternoon's ordeal had left him so weak that his walk was a stooped shuffle.

"Well, that's it, Mr. Leckesh — un-

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til the end. We'll get the electrical; physical, and chemical maps at the end."

"The end? After I die?"

Lo looked a little uncomfortable. "This is where the hospice comes in. We can't take the risk of having your brain degenerate before we can analyze it. For the electrical probes to give reliable readings, the brain still has to be somewhat functional. Unless the tissues are absolutely fresh, the physical microtoming process works very poorly. And memory RNA is an extremely labile substance. The coordination of your brain removal with our team's readiness is a delicate thing."

"Now hold on a minute. What are you saying?" Lo's yellow face and blue hair made Leckesh think of a nightmare by van Gogh.

"I told you that some aspects of our operation are legally questionable, Mr. Leckesh," Each syllable came out just so.

"You're telling me that I'm supposed to make an appointment for your doctors to shock me to death, and cut up my brain, and grind up the pieces for a chemical analysis?"

"We need a day's notice, is all. When you get to the point where you think the end is near, Mr. Leckesh, you simply get in touch with Soft Death, and our ambulance will take you to our hospice."

"What if I wait too long?"

Lo shrugged. "It's a matter of statistics, like everything else. Here." She took what looked like a wristwatch out of her desk. "Wear this. To signal us to come get you, simply push this button here. The watch also has sensors that signal us automatically in case you collapse. Let me stress that the chances of our achieving a fully isomorphic copy of your software are much greater if you come in early. Quite frankly, I'd advise coming in today. I think the crisis is much closer than you realize."

"You're just in a hurry to claim your half of my assets," challenged Leckesh, suddenly wild with fear. His guts were on fire and his head was spinning.

"We already *have* half of your assets," corrected Lo. "The document you signed was a contract, not a will. And by the way, for another quarter of your assets, we would be able to provide software *transmission* as well as the planned preservation . . ."

"I'm getting out of here," shouted Lechesh, in a strained, cracking voice. "Soft Death is a bunch of vampires and ghouls!" In the cab home, he began coughing blood. He wondered if the Soft Death neurologist had poisoned him. This had all been a horrible mistake. He'd never been able to take Bill Kaley for more than an hour at a time; and now he was supposed to spend eternity in a machine with Kaley and a bunch of other rich fools?

He found Abby alone in the apart-

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ment, talking on the phone with Mr. Garden. Leckesh was so desperate to see his wife that he didn't bother to be annoyed.

"Oh Abby, I've been selfish. I'm sorry I've been ignoring you these past few weeks."

"Where's your little recorder, Doug? Did you finish dictating your life story?" Her pale, anxious face was luminous in the apartment's gathering dusk.

"It's all done. Kiss me, Abby."

They hugged and kissed for a long time. Leckesh wondered how he could have thought that his words were more important than Abby's real self, her real body with its real curves and its sweet, real fragrance. And . . . even more real than that . . . her *aura,* the married-couple telepathy they had together, the precious, unspoken understanding of two people in love.

"Doug?"

"What, darling?"

"What have you been up to, really? What were you always talking into that little box for? I know it wasn't a recorder like you said. I heard it talking back to you. And there's something else. I went to the bank today, and half of our money is gone. The teller said some group called Soft Death had a paper giving them the right to take half of our money out. What is Soft Death, Doug?" Abby's voice quavered and broke. "Is it another woman you've been talking to? I wouldn't blame you Doug, with so little time left, but why don't you let *me* help you, too?"

Leckesh's heart swelled as if to burst. After all the bad things he'd thought about Abby in the past — she really did care. She cared more than anyone. Yet, still, he couldn't tell her. It was Soft Death or nothing, wasn't it? There was no immortality outside of their machine. "Soft Death is . . . a kind of hospice. A home for the terminally ill. I signed a contract so I could go there when the cancer gets really bad. I might have to go pretty soon. I coughed blood in the cab, Abby, and I'm hurting bad."

"But . . . half our money, Doug?"

"They pressured me, Abby. And it's not just a hospice. I can't tell you more, you might mess it up. We've both always had our secrets, haven't we?" The pain in his stomach was beating like a bass drum.

"Oh Doug, you've gotten so suspicious of me. There *haven't* been any secrets, darling. It's only because you were older than I that you worried so much. You're all I . . ."

Something collapsed in Leckesh's guts. He pitched forward onto his knees and vomited blood. The sensor in Lo's wristwatch sent out a signal to the Soft Death ambulance that had trailed Leckesh's taxi home.

The funeral was two days later. The only mourner aside from Abby was Irwin Garden, with his baggy pants and turbaned mind. Over Abby's protests, he accompanied her

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back to her apartment.

"I promised Doug not to see you," said Abby, pacing distractedly up and down the richly furnished living room. She stared out the window and turned to look at Garden's calm face. His arched eyebrows showed over his glasses. Abby made up her mind. "Doug will forgive me. He and I still had so much to tell each other. He needs me, Irwin, I can feel it. *Can* you help me reach him?"

"I can try."

Garden opened up his battered briefcase and drew out a large square of silk with a Tibetan mandala on it. He set it down on the dining table, and he and Abby sat down on either side of Leckesh's old seat. Garden lit a stick of incense and began reading from a book he said was the *Tibetan Book of the Dead.*

Time passed. Abby let Garden's droning voice wash over her, as she thought and thought of Doug. It was nearly dark now, and the plume of incense smoke was dense above the silken mandala. The table creaked and shifted; the thick smoke began to give off a faint blue glow. Garden fell silent.

"Doug," said Abby, staring into the luminous smoke. "Doug, are you there?"

The smoke had no words. It only moaned, turning in on itself.

"Is something wrong, Doug? Tell me. Show me."

A pattern formed in the air, indistinct as a cheap hologram, but multicolored, with rainbow fringes at each color-volume's edge. The face of Douglas Leckesh, his tormented face.

Now the face shrank to the size of a fist, and pale color-lines enveloped it.

"A ghost-trap," said Garden softly. "He's telling you that something has his spirit trapped here on earth."

Bright blips raced along the color-lines surrounding Leckesh's face; bright digital blips. His moaning chattered into the sound of typewriters.

"Is it Soft Death, Doug?"

The pulsing lines fell away, and the spirit face nodded. Somewhere in the apartment, a window blew open with a crash. There was a sudden, strong wind, and something white fluttered in from the bedroom. A small white rectangle.

The incense smoke dispersed, and the mandala cloth wafted onto the floor. Doug's face was gone, but there, lying on the table between Abby and Irwin, was a dog-eared business card. The Soft Death business card that Yung had given Leckesh three weeks ago.

Abby was at the Bertroy Building when it opened next morning. After lengthy inquiries, she found herself in Lo Park's basement cubicle.

"What have you done to my husband?" demanded Abby.

The young Korean woman was

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cool and matter-of-fact. "Soft Death Incorporated has preserved his software, according to his request."

"What do you mean?"

"We coded up Douglas Leckesh's brain functions as a pattern of zeros and ones in the computer out there. Would you like to talk with him?"

"I communicated with him last night."

The Korean woman twitched her eyebrows unbelievingly. "I will telephone him for you." She punched some buttons and handed Abby the receiver.

There was chiming and a buzzing, and then a voice. Doug's voice. "Hello?" He sounded bored and unhappy.

"Doug! Is it really you?"

"I . . . I don't know. Abby. You're with Lo Park?"

"Yes. She says you're in her computer. But last night, Irwin Garden called your spirit out of thin air."

A sob of anguish. "I was a fool, Abby. I should have believed you. Get me out of here. It's like an endless business meeting, oh, it's like Hell."

"Your spirit wants you out, too. But it couldn't talk."

"All they have in here is my digital code," said Leckesh's voice. "But not the rest of me. I can hardly remember it in here, Abby, the colors and smells, the feelings you give me. It's wrong for my two parts to be split this way. I was a fool to think I was nothing but numbers. I need to get out of here, and move on to the other side."

"I'll save you, darling."

It didn't take Lo Park long to draw up a contract for half of what Abby had left. In return, Soft Death promised "information transmission."

That afternoon a long, powerful radio signal was beamed straight up from a dish on the top of the Bertroy Building. The signal coded a certain digital information pattern, a bitstring derived from the software of the late Douglas Leckesh. Radio signals are invisible, but if you'd been watching the sky as the Leckesh beam went up, you might have seen an iridule: a brief swirl of rainbow light.

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Mr. Effinger, whose last story here was "Maureen Birnbaum at the Earth's Core" (February 1986), here offers something quite different: a story about memory and about a man who longs for technology's latest toy, nothing less than a time machine . . .

Yesterday's Gone

BY
GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER

I

A waxing yellow moon hung over the town of Pilessio, its pale light filtering down on the red tile roofs below. Everything seemed peaceful, but it was well after midnight. It was the time when many people choose to suffer their greatest pain.

Massimo Zoffolli was in bed, naked on black satin sheets, with his German girlfriend, Aurike. Her last name was on a prescription bottle somewhere, and he had no doubt at all that he could find it if he ever needed to. They were watching a movie on television. Massimo was trying to stay calm, Aurike was trying to go to sleep, but neither was having much success in either direction.

In the movie a uniformed soldier shot an escaping prisoner. Rather than die cleanly, the way you'd expect, the prisoner fell to the ground screaming and yelling and clutching his leg, thrashing around and sending a chill through Massimo. "My God," he murmured, "that was wonderful. That was authentic. That was like the way people get shot in real life."

Aurike turned over scornfully and stared at him for a few seconds. Her reddened eyes were puffy; all the entrancing loveliness that had been in them at dinner had vanished into a discarded tissue. "That," she said heavily, as if making a pronouncement she had made on many other occasions, and to which Massimo never, never paid attention, "is just the exact words you used the first time we watched this goddamn movie." Then she scornfully turned around

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again; her white satin-clad back and shoulders rose like legendary and unreachable isles beckoning across an expanse of deadly, bitter sea.

There was a short, painful silence. "What do you mean," Massimo asked in a hoarse voice, " 'the first time we watched this movie' ? I've never seen this movie before in my life. I'm sitting here overwhelmed by it and I'm trying to tell you about it, and you spent the first twenty minutes of it reading a magazine and then you went to sleep."

"Tried to go to sleep," she corrected.

"What do you mean," he insisted, " 'the first time we watched this movie' ?"

She turned around once more, this time with the patient, patronizing, demeaning graciousness you use when you want to hurt someone. "Listen," she said softly, slowly, as if she were giving complicated directions to two smiling, uncomprehending visitors from Nepal, "three days ago—"

"Friday?"

She smiled. "Friday, right! Friday night we watched *Grand Illusion*, and you told me all about it. Then we went to the Chinese restaurant—which was expensive, but you said was the only real Mandarin food for a hundred miles — and I came home allergic to the peanuts they put on the honeyed banana. So we went to bed early and *this* movie came on; and we watched the whole goddamn thing; and you narrated it as usual; and you pointed out every single goddamn actor or actress who came into camera range, with their whole film histories; and then you started comparing all the character actors I've never heard of to old, dead character actors who my *mother* probably never heard of."

Massimo gave a heavy sigh and knew an anxiety attack was already waiting on his mental porch, its finger hovering above his mental doorbell. "You're the one who can't even remember Robert De Niro from one picture to the next, for God's sake!"

"What the hell difference does it make?" she shouted. "If I like the movie, what the hell difference does it make?"

He smiled. He became outwardly calm and reasonable: passive aggression. "Don't you realize how many people go into making a movie? All the people who contribute to—"

"Don't give me that. I know all about that."

"But these people are artists. They deserve to be recognized. I don't mean awards; I mean by the person who pays his ticket money just to see a good movie. He should sit in that seat and be entertained, and afterward he should say to himself, 'My God, the reason the cinematography was so good was because it was by Vittorio Storaro, who shot *Apocalypse Now* and *Reds*'. Remember Di-

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ane Keaton slowly crossing that gorgeous empty, frozen wasteland?"

"Diane Keaton wasn't in *Apocalypse Now*. You're thinking of Meryl Streep."

"She wasn't in *Apocalypse Now*, either." It was time to give up. Aurike was suggesting to ***him*** that he could possibly confuse Diane Keaton and Meryl Streep.

"I want to go to sleep," she said. "The alarm set?"

"Yeah, I checked."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" she asked, yawning.

"Work on the right hand some more. The fingers are all out of proportion, and I don't like where I have them. They don't seem relaxed or natural."

"I told you that the minute I saw it."

Massimo clenched his jaws. "I'm going out in the living room for a while."

Aurike sat up suddenly in bed. "By yourself? You're going by yourself again? You promised me you wouldn't, not until we could do it together; you hate what it does to you, and you said you'd never do it again. You made me hide the plate."

Massimo didn't want to argue, and the look on his face told Aurike that before he ever said a word. "Give me the bubble plate," he said. He had never used that tone of voice with her before.

She actually shuddered. "Massimo, listen to me. You don't *like* it! Every time, every single time, afterward, you tell me how you hate the feeling, and you give me the plate."

"What am I going to have to do, Aurike?" he asked. His eyes had opened wide and he was taking long, slow breaths through flared nostrils.

"All right, damn it, I'll give you the goddamn plate. I just don't want to hear about it afterward."

"I promise."

Aurike gave a short, dry laugh, went into the bathroom, and took the plate from her hiding place. She stood in the bedroom doorway, her long hair glancing from her shoulders, her lithe body revealed beneath the satin robe. She held the bubble plate toward him. She wouldn't move another inch. It was some sort of battle, and she was in the process of winning some sort of victory. Massimo got out of bed, feeling, as Aurike intended, a symbolic injury to his self-esteem. He went to her and, without looking her in the eyes, took the plate. "Thanks," he muttered. She did not reply. She got back into the bed, turned to face away from the doorway, and was soon asleep.

2

In the living room was the T3P. When Massimo had been nineteen, saving for college, he'd spent the money instead on a terrific stereo

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system he couldn't afford, and amassed a record collection that stunned the people who came over to his apartment. At the age of nineteen, that was an essential part of his seduction technique. At the age of twenty-one, he had to take an extra job to keep up the payments on the outrageously hot car he bought, which stunned everyone whether it was moving or standing still. As far as seduction went, it worked at least 100 percent better than the record collection. At the age of twenty-five, he spent a month's rent money, the phone bill, the utility bill, and the insurance premium on a video recorder, and then started amassing a videotape collection. He didn't have so many friends to impress by then, and as far as seduction was concerned, he thought he ought to be getting more mature about such matters. *Seduction* was suddenly kind of an ugly word, working its way into the same league as *plunder* and *pillage*.

At the age of twenty-nine, after his first wife left him and he was busily working through the obligatory dismal reappraisals, he performed the self-destructive act of spending every lira he was going to make for the next three and a half months on a home computer and a lot of add-ons. This was when he had a real job; in those days he was the manager of one of three Wizard of Oz fast-food franchises in Pilessio, Italy. The computer's capabilities startled him; the more software he bought, the more fun he realized was almost within his grasp. He never brought anybody else home to see it, though. Almost everyone had a computer of his own, to begin with. Massimo didn't need to impress anyone anymore, because now he had the computer to talk to; the programs were generally written in a polite and respectful way, and he liked the machine's attitude. There were text games in which he could wander through huge old mansions looking for a murderer, examining clues and questioning the characters that had been written into the program. After a while, however, despite the fact that the games had built-in time limits, he found himself just going up to the mansion's spare bedroom to take a nap. When the time limit ran out and the program told him he hadn't caught the murderer, Massimo just shrugged, pulled the floppy disk, and went into his real kitchen and fried an egg. He was soon bored again.

In a year or so, when all the games started to look the same, and he'd balanced his checkbook and made an inventory of every loose scrap of paper in his apartment, he spent almost no time with the computer. Instead, he sat alone in the living room, listening to old records he hadn't played in ten or fifteen years. He smiled as he looked through all the posters and pictures and things they used for package in the albums. He remembered

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being nineteen. He remembered his immature feelings and ideas and intentions. He remembered drugs and seductions. He wondered if he could still find someone to buy mescaline from, or someone to seduce. maybe the same person, he told himself slyly, pleased with his own cleverness.

At the age of thirty-five, he began to feel a little distraught. A second wife had figured briefly in his life, entertaining him about as long as the computer had. He looked around himself anxiously. It seemed that technology had failed him. Where was the new gimmick? The new toy? He had the stereo, the car, the video recorder, the computer, the clothes, the cosmetic surgery, everything. His apartment looked like a Radio Shack catalog — no, even better, it looked like the gift suggestions section from a Christmas issue of *Playboy*.

He was thirty-five. Was that middle-aged, or was he just making himself feel unnecessarily edgy? It seemed to him that something great and wonderful and absolutely essential was missing from his life. He knew that lots of men and women his age felt this way. Mid-life crisis, they called it. But Massimo felt a difference. He felt that this great, wonderful, and absolutely essential thing was not a vague quality like "fulfillment" or virtually impossible to achieve, like "self-respect," but right out there now, in the world, physical, actual, necessary to his eventual happiness but for some reason withheld from his possession. But *purchasable*.

Massimo was wrong. That wonderful object that he dreamed of did not exist in the real world. Not yet. But only seven months later, it did.

Just before his thirty-sixth birthday, the Esmeraldas people brought out the first mass-marketed time-travel device. It was large, expensive, cumbersome to operate, and had several negative qualities that the engineers said would all be taken care on in later models. Nevertheless, the first Esmeraldas T3Ps were all sold the day the machine went on the market. Massimo heard about them on the news, and he felt a peculiar calming feeling, a warmth and excitement that were different from sexual warmth and excitement, but just as good. And the urgency and longing were just as strong, too. Massimo knew, as well as he knew any fact at all, that he would own an Esmeraldas T3P. And soon. Forget that the time machine itself was so bulky that it would take over at least half of any normal-sized living room one might put it in. Forget that it cost the equivalent of Massimo's entire salary for roughly eight to ten years. None of that was important. He thought only of how he was going to get his hands on the time machine. A psychotherapist would have told him that he'd made a minor breakthrough: He'd identified the source of his anxiety, his depression, and his unhappiness. Yet Massimo's breakthrough was

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only as practical in his own life as a breakthrough can be for any neurotic. The glow of enlightenment fades even as your dazed mind begins to realize where it has traveled. . . .

Except, again, for one big difference: Massimo couldn't afford a T3P. He didn't even have clothes good enough to wear to the luxurious showroom in Roma. The idea of putting aside a few thousand lira a week and saving up for the next several decades passed through his mind so fast it didn't even warm his neurons. Sure, he told himself, in a couple of years the price will come down a lot. They'll have those bugs worked out. It will be a better machine and it'll be cheaper.

The hell with that, screamed Massimo's aroused mind, *I want it now!*

3

Aurike, with the long blonde hair and her titillating *tedesca* S and M way of speaking Italian, arrived about the same time as the T3P. To tell the truth, the time machine got the nod by twelve hours. Aurike showed up *because* of the time machine, the way other young women had plummeted through Massimo's life because of his lascivious exotic sports car or his other acquisitions. The T3P was installed in his apartment about ten o'clock in the morning; he used it once that afternoon, and in the evening he was in a bar talking about it to whomever would listen. Aurike had been one of the first, and she had gotten nearly as excited about the possibilities of time travel as Massimo had. At last, he thought, I have met my soul mate. Once again he was in error, but that's not really important.

It's also not important that Massimo didn't get around to telling Aurike just how he'd managed to get the money to buy the T3P. He felt it would change her opinion of him. He never explained why he no longer worked at crummy little jobs, but stayed home all day and painted Crucifixion scenes. For a while Massimo thought he loved Aurike — it's always that way, you know exactly what it's like — and so he let her think whatever she wanted. In return, he had a romanticized notion of her. The hard truth was that the only reason she went home with him was because he owned a T3P.

So Massimo was a selfish, insecure thirty-six-year-old man with a strict sense of film standards but few moral or ethical principles to speak of, who had his hands on a brand-new Esmeraldas T3P Time Courier®. The device gave him temporary access to a beautiful German topless dancer whose own flaws matched his so perfectly the two shouldn't be allowed to have children, which they won't.

No real problem, so far. Wanting and getting the T3P was a minor problem for Massimo, but he solved

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it directly and efficiently just by acquiring the huge sum of money he needed to buy it. Money is almost infinitely replaceable, one way or another; problems centering around money are a lot simpler to resolve than, for instance, personality disorders. Massimo's *true* problem began not long after Aurike moved into his apartment. He remembered clearly how it all began.

Aurike was working the night shift, from seven o'clock until three in the morning, so she was asleep when Massimo dressed and left the apartment. He had an early Monday morning appointment with *il signor* Saverio Taviani, the proprietor of the Galleria Taviani, who had expressed some interest in Massimo's paintings. Massimo had been encouraged to hope that Taviani might be persuaded to sponsor Massimo's first showing. Such an event in Pilessio would not attract serious attention from influential European art critics, but it might be the opportunity Massimo needed to be recognized by the galleries of Roma and Firenze.

It was a gloomy, dark day as Massimo left the apartment building. The sky was shrouded with storm clouds tinged an ominous greenish black. Thunder rumbled and rolled, first in the distance, then almost overhead. It hadn't yet started to rain, but Massimo knew that it would very soon. Across the street, *la signorina* Sylvia was feeding her cats. Massimo called to the old woman. "Looks like a storm," he said.

She glanced up at the threatening sky. "We'll all die soon," she said, nodding and smiling.

"You should get back inside. You could be struck by —" Massimo was interrupted by a sizzle and a loud snap, as if someone had cracked a tree branch. Immediately there was a fierce clap of thunder, a single shot like a detonation. Massimo flinched and ducked away. He had seen the lightning stroke kick up dust in the street. "I thought it always hit the highest thing around," he said in a shaky voice.

"It hits where it wants to hit," said *la signorina* Sylvia.

"That's something to remember," said Massimo. "Folk wisdom." He hurried away down the street toward the garage where he kept his car, an imported Trujillo that had cost nearly as much as the T3P. As he walked he noticed an odd thing: all the trash containers along the block had been set out by the curb. The trash was picked up in his neighborhood on Tuesdays and Fridays, so everyone set the containers out on Monday and Thursday evenings. They shouldn't be there now. Massimo shrugged. If one building's trash cans had been there, he might not have thought anything of it; but he couldn't imagine why every building on the block had followed suit. Maybe tomorrow was a holiday — no, even if it were, the

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trash collection would come on Wednesday, not Monday. The first cold, heavy drops of rain made Massimo run the rest of the way to the garage, and he forgot the mystery of the trash cans.

The Galleria Taviani was staffed by a tall young woman whose name Massimo couldn't remember. She wore her long black hair pulled tight at the crown of her head and braided down over her right shoulder. She wore slashes of makeup, black and red and blue, so that Massimo got the impression of an exotic sea creature that belonged on some warm-water coral reef. As he crossed the gallery's luxurious carpet, she rose from her chair and approached him. "*Signor* Zoffolli," she said, smiling, "what can I do for you?"

Massino smiled in return. "I have an appointment to see *il signor* Taviani. At nine-thirty."

The woman stared for an instant, her expression fixed in an impervious professional smile. "Are you certain? I don't believe—"

"Yes," said Massimo, "Monday morning, nine-thirty."

The woman's smile slowly began to fade. She coughed nervously. "Yes, you had an appointment yesterday morning. And you came and spoke with *il signor* Taviani for more than an hour."

"Yesterday?" Massimo felt a cold chill.

"Yesterday. Your nine-thirty appointment. You don't have another appointment today, do you? Let me check." She went to her desk and consulted a leather-bound datebook. "Tuesday, Tuesday," she muttered absently. "No *il signor* Taviani has no appointments at all. I believe he's gone to Milano for a couple of days."

"You're saying that today's Tuesday?"

The woman looked at him uncertainly. "Why, of course. Today's Tuesday. Yesterday was Monday, and you were here."

Massimo recalled the trash cans by his apartment building. It must be Tuesday, he told himself; but what happened to Monday? The last thing he remembered was setting the alarm clock, late Sunday night. He didn't remember Monday at all. He certainly didn't remember having a meeting with Taviani. It was as if a whole day had been ripped out of his life. Snipped out, like a length of motion picture film. He didn't feel confusion — confusion would have resulted if he had vague or conflicting memories of Monday. This was different, and he felt a growing horror. Something was very wrong. He felt dangerously adrift, as if he had been handed indisputable proof that he was going crazy. As if someone had come into the room and shown beyond the shadow of a doubt that what Massimo had always called "up" was really "down." He would have to make new definitions, new relations between himself and

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the world. His entire way of understanding reality now appeared to be invalid, and he had a hell of a big job to do. He had to sort out all of this, and he had to do it quickly.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked. His voice sounded very weak and unsteady to him.

"You're pale, *signor* Zoffolli," said the black-haired woman. "Would you like some water?"

"No thank you, I'll be fine. May I make a telephone call?"

"Certainly." She indicated the telephone on her desk, then walked away to allow him privacy.

Massimo punched his home number. The telephone rang twelve times before Aurike answered. She didn't sound pleased. "Yeah?"

"It's me," said Massimo.

"You woke me up, you know."

"I'm sorry. Listen, what did I do yesterday?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Didn't we talk about it?"

"Yeah, *you* did, anyway. You went to see that old queen from the gallery, and he told you that he couldn't do anything for you for at least a year, and you said how much you wanted to bust up his crummy place and rip the snotty rich-bitch clothes off that whore who works for him."

Massimo suddenly felt very lightheaded and his throat was dry. He was frightened. "I'm sorry I woke you up, baby. Go back to sleep."

"What was this all about?"

"Tell you later." He hung up the phone and looked around the gallery. The woman was watching him, and she wasn't smiling. Massimo realized that he had probably sounded pretty crazy to her. He tried to seem calm. "Sorry," he said. "Must be the new medication. Lower-back pain. Doctor said there might be some side effects. I better go home."

"You should be careful," said the woman. "Maybe someone should come get you."

He turned his back on her. You can go to hell, too, he thought as he walked out of the gallery.

The situation did not improve: Massimo was still scared. He felt dazed and dreamlike, as if he didn't really exist, as if the world had become as flimsy as a soap bubble. If it *was* Tuesday — and that seemed to be the consensus — then quite clearly he couldn't rely on either his senses or his judgment. Then how could he know what to believe and what not to believe?

His hands were sweating as he steered the Trujillo through the traffic, back toward the garage. All right, he told himself, I lost a day somewhere. Maybe I should tell a doctor, but it's not a serious thing. Not unless it happens again. The very possibility made him shiver.

There were more shocks waiting for him when he got home. The first thing he noticed as he fumbled with his keys was a large hole in the hol-

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low front door, as if someone had tried to kick it in. The hole was near the doorknob, so anyone could just reach in and unlock the door. Massimo's eyes opened wider, and he hurried into the apartment, fearful of what he might find.

The more he explored, the more he found. The kitchen sink was filled with dirty dishes — it hadn't been like that before he'd gone to bed. Of course, he reminded himself, he last remembered going to sleep on Sunday night, and this was evidently Tuesday morning. Still, Aurike and he couldn't have dirtied so many dishes in one day. In the living room there were ashtrays filled with cigarette butts. Neither Massimo nor Aurike smoked, and Massimo discouraged anyone else from smoking in his home. There were empty bottles littering the carpet, bottles of American carbonated chocolate soda and Ecuadoran beer that he would never dream of buying. He turned slowly around in astonished fear. The linen closet door was off its hinges, propped against the wall as if it were waiting for someone to think of a new use for it. Two screwdrivers lay on the carpet nearby. Here and there throughout the apartment, Massimo found still more signs that something bizarre had happened here, something he didn't remember at all. A lot of people had helped to create this mess, too. Massimo wondered who they might have been.

He went into the bedroom and woke up Aurike. "What *happened* last night?" he asked her.

"You woke me up again," she said in a surly voice. Her eyes would open only halfway.

"What the *hell happened* in this apartment last night?"

"I don't know. I was at work. You were asleep when I got home."

"When *did* you get home?"

She shrugged. "About five. Took a cab. Was pretty loaded."

Massimo looked at her for a moment. She did seem moderately hung over, but she was like that a lot. "You didn't notice the hole in the front door?"

"What hole?"

"You didn't see the closet door leaning up against the wall?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Go take a look in the living room," said Massimo.

Aurike sighed and dropped her head back to the pillow. "Go to hell," she muttered. She growled a few more words in German; Massimo had heard them on other mornings. He knew they were what Wagner's dragon says to Siegfried when the hero comes to steal the treasures away. They translated roughly as "Yo' mama," an evocative phrase Massimo had learned from American films.

"All right, O.K.," he said. He left her there and went back out to the other room. He sat on the couch and stared at the T3P. There were crum-

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pled paper napkins and paper plates, half-empty bottles, and more full ashtrays resting on it. Its beautiful pebbled steel shank was smeared with marinara sauce. The fear that Massimo had felt at the gallery had not gone away; now, as he considered what might have happened the night before, the anxiety intensified. Who knew what he might have said — to strangers, to friends who now thought differently of him — what he might have done? Many hours were missing from his memory. He might have done anything, he might have gone temporarily insane, committing awful, horrible—

He wouldn't let himself complete that thought. He fought for a simple explanation. He probably had had too much to drink at some party he threw on the spur of the moment — except that he never threw parties. He didn't like entertaining, and he didn't like going out to other people's parties. He would never have invited so many people to his apartment. From the evidence, there must have been at least a dozen, maybe twice as many.

He probably just had had too much drink, except that he had no hangover at all. He should feel something, for God's sake. Then he'd probably taken too many pills — except that would have left him with a drug hangover, too, and he felt fine now, if you disregarded the steadily mounting desperation. He began to clean up the apartment slowly and methodically, ignoring all the further odd things he turned up — an empty, wet plastic bag and six dead guppies beside a floor lamp, for instance. He was careful not to examine the evidence as he threw it all into garbage bags. He was getting a sick feeling in his stomach. An hour later he was on the telephone, hiring a carpenter to hang a new front door and remount the closet door. That was going to cost him at least a week's salary at his old job.

That alarming experience had occurred weeks ago, and Massimo wanted to forget about it, to shrug his shoulders and chalk it up to a quirky, temporary lapse. Like occasional impotence — happens to everybody, it's not important, your life as a man isn't over. He wanted to forget, but he couldn't. Something new reminded him every day thereafter.

4

He didn't look back at Aurike after he took the bubble plate from her. He went straight into the dark living room and felt his way to the bulk of the Time Courier®. His breathing was quick and shallow, and he had a momentary nightmare of chipping or damaging the vital bubble plate while he slipped it clumsily into its slot. The plate unlocked the plastic canopy, and Massimo stretched himself out on the comfortable pad-

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ded surface. He closed the canopy by punching a button directly over his head. There was a slight mechanical noise and the hum of an air-circulation system. Then the gray main computer screen lit up. Massimo always hated this part, but there was no way around it. It took so much time; but it was programed in, and the word down at the dealer's room was that you couldn't take it out without destroying the bubble plate and making it useless. It was for his own protection.

HELLO, SIGNOR ZOFFOLLI. IT IS MAY 28, 1997, 05:23:51 LOCAL TIME.

YOU HAVE INSERTED YOUR SPECIALLY CONSTRUCTED BUBBLE PLATE, AND HAVE THUS MANUALLY ACTIVATED YOUR ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER®. THE CANOPY IS IN PLACE AND LOCKED, AND THE TIME COURIER® IS NOW READY FOR USE. IF YOU WISH TO CONTINUE, PRESS THE GREEN "YES" BUTTON. IF YOU WISH TO DISENGAGE, PRESS THE RED "NO" BUTTON.

With an impatient mutter, Massimo jammed the green button with his thumb.

WARNING!
DO NOT DISREGARD! IT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL THAT THE OCCUPANT OF THIS TIME COURIER® READ THE FOLLOWING MANUFACTURER'S DISCLAIMER:

WARNING!

THE BUBBLE PLATE THAT ACTIVATES THE ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER® IS ATTUNED SPECIFICALLY TO THE PARTICULAR BRAIN WAVES OF THE OWNER OF THIS MACHINE. NO ONE ELSE CAN USE THIS BUBBLE PLATE. THE USE OF THIS BUBBLE PLATE BY ANY OTHER INDIVIDUAL MAY LEAD TO EXTENSIVE NEUROLOGICAL DAMAGE, BRAIN DYSFUNCTION, AND EVEN DEATH.

THE OCCUPANT OF THIS ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER® MUST SIGNIFY NOW THAT HE OR SHE UNDERSTANDS THE PRECEDING NOTICE. PRESS THE GREEN "YES" BUTTON.

Massimo mashed it again.

THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION OF LA PAZ, BOLIVIA*, ITS LICENSEES, SUBCONTRACTORS, AND/OR AUTHORIZED SERVICE REPRESENTATIVES CANNOT BE HELD LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR MENTAL OR PHYSICAL HARM CAUSED BY THE INTENTIONAL MISUSE OF A BUBBLE PLATE ISSUED BY THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION, OR BY A BUBBLE PLATE ILLEGALLY MANUFACTURED FOR THE ILLICIT OPERATION OF A T3P TIME COURIER®

*PLEASE NOTE: BOLIVIA® IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK AND A WHOLLY OWNED SUBSIDIARY OF ITT.

THE OCCUPANT OF THIS ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER® MUST NOW SIGNIFY THAT HE OR SHE HAS READ THIS ADDITIONAL WARNING. PRESS THE GREEN "YES"

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BUTTON. PRESSING THE GREEN "YES" BUTTON ABSOLVES THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION AND ALL ITS SUBSIDIARIES FROM FAULT IN ANY FUTURE LITIGATION ARISING FROM THE UNAUTHORIZED USE OF ANY BUBBLE PLATE.

Massimo hit the green button a third time. They were so goddamned cautious. Still, the Esmeraldas people were just getting warmed up. They'd stop just short of reminding him to take along a clean handkerchief.

BRAIN WAVE MATCHING CONFIRMS THAT THE OCCUPANT OF THIS ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER® IS SIGNOR MASSIMO ZOFFOLLI. YOUR PREVIOUS USE OF THIS TIME COURIER® WAS ON MAY 27, 03:25:15 LOCAL TIME. WE ARE REQUIRED TO REMIND YOU OF PART THREE, SECTION 1, PARAGRAPH 1 OF YOUR USER'S MANUAL, WHICH STATES THAT TOO-FREQUENT USE OF THIS APPARATUS COULD LEAD TO VARIOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES OF MORE OR LESS SEVERE EXTENT, AND THAT CERTAIN PHYSICAL SIDE EFFECTS HAVE BEEN REPORTED AS WELL.

BECAUSE YOUR USE OF YOUR TIME COURIER® EXCEEDS THE GUIDELINES SUGGESTED BY YOUR USER'S MANUAL, THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION OF LA PAZ, BOLIVIA, IS REQUIRED TO WARN YOU OF THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES. THESE CONTRAINDICATIONS INCLUDE, BUT ARE NOT LIMITED TO:

"Here we go," murmured Massimo with a sigh.

HEADACHE, HANGOVER, FATIGUE, DIZZINESS, TORPOR, TRANSIENT PARESTHESIA OF THE EXTREMITIES, RESTLESSNESS OR ANXIETY, DRY MOUTH, NAUSEA, DEPRESSION, HYPOTENSION, HYPERTENSION, CHANGES IN LIBIDO, TREMORS, URINARY RETENTION, HALLUCINATIONS, INSOMNIA, RAGE, SLEEP DISTURBANCES, PALPITATIONS, NIGHTMARES, NUMBNESS, ALTERATION IN EEG PATTERNS, DIARRHEA, CONSTIPATION, RETROACTIVE AMNESIA, AND SO FORTH.

IF SOME OR ANY OF THESE CONDITIONS OCCUR, PLEASE CONSULT YOUR PHYSICIAN. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT OVERUSE OF YOUR T3P UNIT MAY BE THE SOURCE OF THESE PROBLEMS, BUT THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION OF LA PAZ CANNOT TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAKING SUCH A DIAGNOSIS. HOWEVER, YOU ARE REMINDED AS PER PART THREE, SECTION 1, PARAGRAPH 1 OF YOUR USER'S MANUAL THAT THE ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER® SHOULD NOT BE OPERATED MORE FREQUENTLY THAN ONCE EVERY THIRTY-SIX HOURS BY ANY INDIVIDUAL. YOUR MISUSE OF YOUR T3P UNIT MAY LEAD TO SOME OR ANY OF THE CONDITIONS LISTED ABOVE, OR OTHERS NOT LISTED OR NOT YET REPORTED. THE ESMERALDAS CORPORATION OF LA PAZ CANNOT BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH CONTINUED DANGEROUS CONDUCT ON YOUR PART.

IT IS FURTHER STRONGLY RECOMMENDED, SIGNOR ZOFFOLLI, THAT YOU REFRAIN FROM OPERATING A MOTOR VEHICLE OR HEAVY EQUIPMENT FOR AN HOUR OR TWO

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FOLLOWING THE USE OF YOUR ESMERALDAS T3P TIME COURIER®.

"You are absolved, and may sleep blamelessly tonight in your beds in La Paz, your corporate conscience clean." Massimo punched the green button again, located his destination's coordinates on the unit's scrolling encyclopedia screen, punched them in, punched off the remaining fail-safes, and relaxed into the peculiar dissolving glow as the machine flung his mind back into the distant past.

5

It was like dreaming, it was like having those childhood dreams of flying home from school over the old neighborhood. There was exhilaration. Then, suddenly, there was heaviness. All at once his mind felt leaden, as if it had grown a new body — the old body was still in the T3P, back there in the darkened living room, separated now from its animating spirit by centuries — and Massimo's senses seemed to house themselves in quickly thrown together constructs that walked among ancient cities and spoke to long-dead people and gazed with awe at all there was to gaze at.

Tonight Massimo was present once again at the Crucifixion, a time and a place he'd visited many times before. He felt little excitement; watching the death of Jesus the first time had been emotionally exhausting, but after the tenth repetition it was like anything else. It was like one of the old records or tapes he never played anymore, although they still took up space on his shelves. Most of the other people at the scene also seemed tired and anxious to be someplace else. The Roman soldiers leaned on their spears, yawning, waiting for their shift to end. The simple men and women on the hilltop found little to keep themselves occupied. Some of the more historically notable characters has a little trouble keeping their minds on the significance of the moment, as well. One woman — Massimo didn't know for certain, but he would have guessed that she was Mary Magdalene, although she might just have been some nameless onlooker —kept glancing up at the sky and asking, "What do you think?" She was concerned either if Jesus was, in fact, still alive, or about a sudden storm catching them all so far from town. In any event, no one answered her.

Well, here was the Roman Empire at the height of its fame and glory; Tiberius sat on the Italian throne and all the roads pointed straight at him. Massimo was not very impressed. Television and movies put together much better spectacles than real life can manage. Here the dirt looked like cheap dirt, the scrubby trees looked like scrubby trees without an ounce

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of artistry in them, and the mud bricks were just like mud bricks. Everyone was grimy, they smelled awful, and it had been a long afternoon and the Romans didn't bother with portable bathrooms. All Massimo wanted to do was observe hands — Christ's hands, Mary's hands. He just couldn't get the hands right. He wished, not for the first time, that he could bring a camera with him. The hands were so important — Massimo couldn't have said why. In his paintings the rest of the scene looked rather conventional. Massimo was derivative, to be kind about it. In his work, faces showed more ardor than he saw here at Calvary. In his paintings there was ethereal light and expressions of unbearable anguish. In real life, Massimo saw only a thinning crowd of slope-shouldered people who were beginning to think about calling it a day. That's not the way Michelangelo portrayed it, Massimo knew. That's not the way Caravaggio showed the bare hilltop and the ragged throng and the agony. It just happened to be the way it was, the way it really was. So that wasn't going to be the way Massimo Zoffolli showed it, either. If he added a cherub or two to what his impartial mind recorded, that was his business. There was plenty of precedent.

After a while some man stood up and brushed the pebbles from his bare knee and knelt again on the other knee. Massimo was almost sure it was John. Someone else coughed several times. The woman in the cloak checked the sky again and said, "What do you think?" This could go on forever, Massimo thought. He stared at hands until he felt them incised into his brain, and then he returned to the present.

He rested in the T3P for a few minutes. He thought about making some sketches, some quick drawings to capture what he'd just seen, but he was too tired. He could do that in the morning. Instead, he punched another destination on the computer, and had to wait through the entire warning process again. Massimo went back to the previous Friday night and watched the scene with Aurike. Everything happened just as she had said it had. Observing himself like that gave Massimo a spooky, unpleasant feeling, and he didn't stay long. He thought about visiting the missing night and finding out how his closet door had got unhinged, but at the last moment he decided it was a secret he obviously was not meant to know. If his errant mind ever wanted to fill in those details, it would. Meanwhile, Massimo wouldn't go looking for trouble. He unlocked the canopy, slipped out the bubble plate, and went into the bedroom. Aurike was sound asleep. Massimo felt terrible. He felt as if, while his mind had traveled far and seen much, some son of a bitch had beaten his dormant body with a club for hours on end.

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Aurike woke up in the middle of the afternoon and poured herself a glass of milk. She was wearing the pink knit tube top and cutoff shorts she'd worn to work the evening before. Massimo gave her a look of distaste. He wondered if she was going to wear them to work again in a few hours, or if they'd just been conveniently near her feet when she got out of bed. She looked in the refrigerator for something to eat that she wouldn't have to cook and found a box of cookies. The two people sat at the table for a long time before anyone said anything.

"So did the book help?" she asked at last. She was reading the back of the box of cookies.

"What book?"

She looked up in amazement. "You made me go to the library for you before work last night. You couldn't go yourself because you were feeling too damn bad. You made me get this book, pictures of hands. I had to carry it around all night in my goddamn bag. Because you were feeling too damn bad. I gave you the book last night."

"I don't remember you giving me anything last night," he said.

"That seems to happen a lot lately. Or have you forgotten?

"Look, life is tough enough as it is, without having to go through everything twice. What about the tape?"

She looked up at the ceiling. "You remember about the tape. I gave that to you the same time I gave you the book. Just before I went to bed, while you were watching that movie. Before the big argument."

Massimo didn't remember either book or tape. It was just another lapse, he told himself. It seemed sometimes that his whole past was dissolving like a wet tissue. His hands felt clammy, but he tried to relax. It would all pass.

"So how do you feel today?" she asked.

"O.K.," he said.

"I mean, usually when you use the machine, you feel so rotten. You really hate the way it makes you feel. You spend too much time in it; that's what they told you, you know. But you won't listen."

Massimo thought for a moment. He didn't feel that bad, to tell the truth; the worst was that he felt a little dreamlike again, as if he'd left a small portion of himself behind on the pillow when he got up to brush his teeth. He didn't feel wholly solid, as if he might not be truly having this conversation with Aurike. As if some part of his mind were still left behind awaiting miracles at Golgotha. He didn't hurt, though, and he wasn't having an attack of panic. He just felt slightly dazed. "I didn't use the machine last night, did I?" he asked. "I remember giving you the plate to

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hide." The look she gave him made him flinch. He had never seen so much contempt from anyone before. "I don't remember using it last night," he said softly.

"You *did*, you goddamn did, bullying me around to give you the bubble plate when I was trying to go to sleep, and then bullying me around when you got back to hide it again because you felt so terrible that you said you weren't going to use the machine again for a week. I deserve to sleep, too, you know. I work, you know. I don't have to put up with this."

Massimo wished that he could remember using the machine the night before. He couldn't even recall the argument Aurike was talking about, and he couldn't remember what had happened after he returned. Not only had his memory of the time trip itself been wiped out, but so had a good segment of time on either side of it. He felt a growing nausea; he looked at his hands, and they were trembling. His hands looked wrong to him.

"This is what they call compulsive behavior, you know," said Aurike, with her mouth full of crumbled cookies. "You don't have to drink or use drugs to be a junkie or something. You do it even though you hate it, and you tell me how much you hate it, but you forget you hate it and you do it again or something. That machine is ruining your life."

"Leave me alone about it," said Massimo sullenly. She was right; he knew it. What he didn't know was what he was going to do about it.

"You're burning your brain away. Why? Where do you go? What do you see?"

"I go to visit the Crucifixion mostly," said Massimo weakly. "I look at the hands."

"To fix your painting."

"Yes."

That seemed to arouse her fury for some reason. "Some goddamn cheap reason to go look at the Crucifixion. So your painting will sell or something. They shouldn't allow you to go to places like that. Not people like you."

Massimo thought about the hands he had seen there, back then. They should be imploring hands, he thought, or surrendering hands, or hands finding peace at last after such an ordeal. He didn't remember anything like that at all. He just remembered hands, ordinary hands attached to wrists, with no luminous qualities of any kind. He was looking for transcendence and he saw only anatomy. That's why he couldn't get them right in his own painting. That's why he had borrowed the book; so he could steal Leonardo's sketches or someone else's. So many artists had imbued every detail of that moment with such magnificence, and they hadn't been within a millennium and a half of the event. Massimo, how-

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ever, Massimo had actually *been* there, seen it with his own eyes again and again, and he was still failing.

"I'm going to leave you," said Aurike. "I'm going in to work in a little while, Inez is giving me a ride, and I'm taking my stuff with me. It's been nice knowing you, and you have great taste in cars and things, but I don't need this kind of treatment. Just thought I'd let you know."

He rubbed his forehead in pain. "You don't know what it's like, Aurike. It's like, well, like your memory was a page printed in a book, see? And you could read it anytime and remember, except that it's like someone has spattered blobs of black ink all over mine. There are little gaps and holes, not relating to anything, just smeared all over at random. I can never tell when I'm going to forget a conversation I had with somebody or a promise I made or something. The other morning I spent a terrible hour trying to remember my first wife's name. Do you have any idea what that kind of mental torment does to you?"

Aurike finished the cookies and tossed the empty box into the kitchen sink. "Listen," she said, "you remember that business last night about you not remembering the movie we were watching?"

"Sure," said Massimo. At the moment, frighteningly, he *didn't* remember. He had no idea at all of what she was talking about.

"Well, yesterday morning you gave me this same printed-page speech, word for word, and how you couldn't remember you first wife's name. It's Costanzia; you should write it down. Massimo, baby, I have to let old men just like you tell me sad stories just like this all night long at work. Only I get paid for it and they buy me drinks. Come by the club sometime. *Ciao.*"

Massimo raged. "There are lots of others out there just like you, you bitch. Don't think you're so goddamn special."

Aurike's blonde hair swished as she turned around. She smiled icily. "There sure are," she said, "and we all think exactly the same about guys like you. You were going to get me my own bubble plate, you lying bastard. So be happy with your houseful of toys and gadgets." She slammed the front door heavily behind her.

Fifteen minutes after she left, Massimo was lying on the bed watching the news. He'd just heard about a marvelous scientific breakthrough that just might make matter transmission possible. Home units that could offer cheap and instantaneous travel anywhere in the world — or beyond, as soon as off-world terminals were established — could be on the market in a few years. The Esmeraldas people, who commented on the report, suggested that such a device coupled with their own T3P might enable people to visit the past physically, instead of as an out-of-body experience. And Esmeraldas had wonderful

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new promises about their own product, as well: a T4P, an improved model with many of the promised refinements, would go on the market within six months. Massimo listened to it all with shaking hands and his heartbeat pounding loudly in his head. He had to search the apartment now. He had to tear it apart, drawer by drawer, shelf by shelf, ripping up the carpeting if he had to, tearing out the cupboards, eviscerating the plumbing and stripping the paneling. He knew Aurike had hidden the bubble plate somewhere in the rooms, or she had taken it with her. He didn't even particularly care if he found it in the apartment, but tearing everything apart would give him several hours before he would actually have to go and face her.

He stood up from the table, and his hands shook. He shoved them into his pockets and went into the living room. He sat on the couch and stared at the Time Courier®. After a few minutes he began ripping the couch's cushions apart.

"What did people do before they had robots?"

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David Holmstrom has written fiction, articles and humor for a number of magazines (including Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *and* Campus Life*), and he was awarded a grant for fiction writing from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation. His first F&SF story is a strikingly original tale about an unlikely friendship between a vulture and a bear . . .*

Pink Bears

BY

DAVID HOLMSTROM

Dagget set out on a cold morning with a warm sun melting the last of winter snow. Before he left he filled his belly with deer and put coins in his pouch. His brother was asleep on the bed, legs spread wide and his stomach rumbling with each breath of sleeping air.

As an unshaven bear, Dagget could travel easily through the forest paralleling the highway. The thick hide protected him from thorns and nettles. On all fours he moved swiftly, crashing through the underbrush and utilizing the theory that the more noise he made, the less likely he was to be attacked or stumble into trouble.

He had grown to love the spring flowers, the little puffs of blue, yellow, and orange that were pushing their way through the slush. All kinds of berries were at least three weeks away. Occasionally he rose on his hind legs and practiced his two-legged walk. Certainly there would be many full-walking bears at the conference, bears whose bodies were shaved to pink and wore spectacular coats of lion manes, bears with red lips from cities and villages where furniture was made and everyone drank from cups.

His brother would have nothing to do with shaven bears. "Pus," he called them, "Pink excrement defiling the forest integrity, an affront to our savagery."

But Dagget was curious. All bears were not stupid; certainly there were some benefits to be gained from being shaved and pink despite the alleged nuisance of being shaved twice a month. He laughed in the forest as he practiced his walk. "To the pink I'm drawn," he told a sullen blackbird upon a branch, "and what pleas-

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ure would be mine if pink I became?" The bird answered, "Four legs! Four legs! Feathers are better, hair is for brushes and rugs! Four legs! Four legs! Four legs! Feathers are better!"

Within an hour, Dagget had crossed the cold and bulging Fenimore River. It swept down from the mountains, now full from the melting snows, and cascaded over falls as it made its way to the valley below. On the far bank, just under a huge tree, Dagget saw a reddened carcass of fresh meat and slick, white bones surrounded by turkey vultures.

Just for fun, he roared and pretended he was going to charge them, his bulk of a thousand pounds parting the water like the prow of a ship. The birds squawked in terror and lifted quickly off the carcass, bumping into each other like clowns as they escaped.

One vulture, braver than the rest, circled out over Dagget. "You bears are all alike," he said. "I try to be friends, but you mock our ugliness and hunger. Is there not an unshaven bear in all the forest who could cast some friendship to an old turkey vulture?"

Dagget stopped at the river's edge and looked up at the ugly bird. "I would laugh at that miracle," he said. The bird swooped right and let loose a ball of white excrement that tumbled down out of the sky and struck Dagget on the back.

"You damned sheaf of filth!" Dagget bellowed, and plunged beneath the water to wash his back clean. Then he rose out of the river, furious. He stood on his hind legs and swatted at the bird flying just out of his paw range.

"A signal from me," said the craggy bird, "and you lose whatever grace you have under a barrage of lovely excrement, a creamy gift from all my brothers."

Dagget recognized in himself the echoes of his ancestors as he stood there, the pestering of a common bird turning him into rage. Where was the new bear he had vowed to become? Did not the capacity for words hold the promise he worked for? To be civil? To think clearly? Bristle no more, he told his heart; see the bird as a rascal inventing a net to catch any fool. Dagget lowered himself to all fours. "Ugly but clever," he said to the bird.

"Thank you." The bird settled on a boulder about twenty feet away. "Herein lies my point," he said, his raw, pink head almost red in the sun as two black eyes, parted by a craggy beak, fastened on Dagget. "The state of bears is changing swiftly."

Dagget stood on the shore, his brown, luxurious coat dripping water as he wiped his eyes. "Would you care to guess how difficult it has become to find carcasses?" said the bird. "You, sir, and your repulsive brother are the lone bears within a range of six miles. In the golden days

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there were some twenty big brutes killing and sleeping within the spread of my wings. Now there are two. Your brother kills regularly. You kill occasionally. Your brother picks all the bones clean, leaving little for us. And you, sir, with all due respect, have taken to eating with plenty of intervals for talking to yourself. You rest, you sit not like the assured bear of old, but a bear caught up in uncertainties. The food — our food — rots at your feet while you sit and consider going pink or walking permanently on all fours or moving to a city. You do not let us near. Fresh meat, sir, is appreciated even by a turkey vulture."

"The bear," said Dagget in a matter-of-fact tone, "is king of the forest. He rules."

"Until my death, sir, this will always be," said the bird, in calculated deference. "But I propose an arrangement." The bird leaned closer, casting his eyes across the river to his brothers huddled over the carcass. "I propose a partnership of bear and vulture," he whispered, "one in which I look out for your safety from the sky and aid smartly in the location of animals for your killing pleasure. All I ask is to be assured private access to the ample leftovers of your kills as a measure of your trust and appreciation. My stomach growls in anticipation."

Dagget scoffed. "An arrangement knocked together in a bag of nuts," he said. "I'm off to a conference. I have no need of a turkey vulture with the bearing of a frog. Fresh meat is promised for all at the conference."

He walked away on his hind legs, his body oddly stiff and jerking as he tried to get the swing of his front legs to balance with the stepping of his feet. The bird lifted off the rock and circled above Dagget. "Sir, may I offer a suggestion for the art of walking?" he said. "Think of your front legs as reeds in water, floating up and down on the current, light, airy, filled with easy movement . . ."

Dagget couldn't resist the suggestion. He thought of his front legs as reeds. His walk improved, his legs felt lighter and less awkward. Still, he jerked along proudly. So, thought Dagget, this is how I must leave clumsiness for grace, in my mind first. He looked up at the vulture. "Surely you have a name," he said.

Ah, thought the vulture, the partnership is struck. He could taste the coming meat and feel the bones under claw. "Azmo," he said calmly, "which means 'flying above you.' "

Dagget laid down the conditions. "Azmo, the ugly, we have between us a temporary relationship, balanced in my favor, open to severance at any moment by me. I don't need you. But prove your worth and your need becomes clear. Unless I call you, stay away. I will not be seen with a vulture hanging around me at the conference. Now, go away; come back only to prove your worth."

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Dagget returned to all fours, his pace quickening as he sought to reach the conference well before sundown. Azmo, indeed, he thought. Of what use to me is a vile little turkey vulture?

Anticipating the excitement of the conference, he plunged through the forest as Azmo rose above him, a sensuous black cipher with power against a blue sky. "We will see whose worth comes first," whispered the bird, his eye following the running bear.

An hour later, Azmo spotted the danger. He drifted in a semicircle, his wings spread and holding, lowering himself into the forest until he was just above the loping Dagget. "Sir," he said, "ahead of you, in your path, lie three sizable bears."

Dagget slowed and glanced up at the fluttering vulture. "Sir," said the bird, "three against one has created many fresh grave sites."

"How do I know you're not leading me to them instead of away?" said Dagget, who stopped and stood erect on his hind legs. He had no desire to defend himself against the fury of three unknown bears. "Do they exist, or do you wish them to exist?" He smelled the air current in front of him.

"Between us lies the fountain of trust," said Azmo. "We must both drink equally."

"Come closer," said Dagget, smiling and testing.

Azmo settled on the branch of a nearby pine tree, ten feet away. His beady eyes burned in small fear.

"Closer," said Dagget.

Azmo moved awkwardly, claw over claw along the branch, edging toward Dagget's enormous head and salivating mouth. Five feet away, he stopped. "Trust, sir, is recommended," he said weakly.

"You're shaking," said Dagget.

"Your teeth, sir, sicken me with their beauty."

Dagget laughed. "Closer," he said. "Trust."

Within reach of Dagget's paws, Azmo stopped. Never before had he been so close to a living bear. Dozens of times he had picked a dead bear clean. Heat radiated from the hairy Dagget, his black eyes the size of a vulture's head, his neck as thick as a tree. Across his nose and muzzle was a deep scar, a rope of grizzled red. Dagget's hot, meat-smelling breath poured over Azmo. "Trust me, sir," Azmo whispered, feeling his innards about to give way as the two creatures stared across the species.

Quickly Dagget reached up with both paws. "Now!" he yelled, and grabbed Azmo around the neck. The bird squawked in terror, thrashing his wings, feathers flying while Dagget laughed, held tight, and said. "What sweet little bones."

"Sir," gasped Azmo, inches from Dagget's monumental shining nose, "have I not proven my trust?"

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"A possible diversion," said Dagget. "My back is turned. Three bears are creeping up on me?"

"No, no! I swear on the bodies of four dead wives! Three bears, straight ahead, wanting to do battle, killers the size of two lions each!"

Dagget released him. Choking and gasping, Azmo tumbled to the ground, thrashing his wings and stumbling out of reach across the debris on the forest floor. Smaller birds had gathered in the high branches to watch. Reeling from the encounter, Azmo turned back toward the amused Dagget. "You stinking king-sized maggot!" he squawked, his eyes bulging. "You agony of a thousand boils! Your penis is a baked apple!"

All the birds hooted and whistled.

When Dagget turned around, the three bears were coming swiftly toward him, the ancient one on the right with lips curled back over his crooked teeth. He moved deliberately, a caution learned from many battles. Except for the sound of twigs and leaves breaking underfoot as they approached Dagget, there was no sound from their jaws.

The middle bear was female, her left forearm injured in some way, her body loosened by too many births. Small and ill-tempered, she was there only because of the two males with her. The third bear was young, with muscles that were strong but a year from hardened power. He moved swiftly, though, a rush that was as playful as it was aggressive. Three feet from Dagget, he rose up on his hind legs and roared. Dagget saw the dumb flash of youth in his eyes, and swung quickly with his right paw. It bashed into the neck and shoulder and knocked the bear over and down on his right side like a toy.

The ancient bear broke the afternoon like glass with a primeval scream that sent chills through Dagget. Azmo leapt from the ground to flight, terrified at the unholy noise. But indicating his genuine allegiance, he flew quickly to a tree just behind Dagget, ready to plunge his talons into an enemy eye if needed.

Dagget backed up, his paws spread in peace. "Brother," he said to the old bear, "your roar is loud, but your legs are brittle and you carry many wounds. You have my respect. It is not my wish to fight with you . . ."

The old bear's eyes were surprised and confused. He stared at Dagget, trying to understand a bear who would not fight. Then he dropped heavily to all fours and began swaying his head back and forth. He moaned, oblivious to his pathos, a relic in weary disintegration, head back and forth, back and forth.

"There is nothing worse than a bear as old as twenty trees," said the female bear, moving toward him. "He'll do this for hours if somebody doesn't kick him." She thumped him on the head, but the old bear moved away and continued to sway and

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moan. "Sex brings him around occasionally," she said with a wink. "But it doesn't even tickle anymore."

The young bear approached Dagget. "An unfortunate incident," he said, looking apologetic, and pointed to the old bear. "Once prodigious, now in twilight." He shrugged. "He said attack. I playfully obeyed. You saw through it. Let us, as the red humans used to say, bury the hatchet." He grinned and held out his paw.

Dagget watched the old bear, an uneasiness rippling over his own back as the moaning continued. "How old is he?" he asked. "Twice older than he looks," said the female bear. "He forgets my name now but remembers a kill ten years ago." She tapped her head. "Pieces," she said. "Once whole, now pieces." From side to side the old bear moaned. He was lost in a haunted world.

Dagget turned away quickly. He would have none of this, the mouth of old age sucking away his life. It was not for him, for he still knew the evidence and sharpness of his power. He would never crumble, never drool his brains away or walk slowly looking for a place to sit. He would never moan and sway from side to side like his old bear. I'm twice younger than I look, he thought.

He leapt away from the old bear, into the forest, crashing with full life. He roared to celebrate the prime of his life. "ARRRGGHHHHH!" It was for the joy of a full-spirited heart that he roared. If he could fly, he would have; if nine females had appeared, he would have done them one by one and started over. He was not sagging and old.

"Sir," said Azmo, fluttering just above him, "I expected a kill, even some modest but delicious bloodshed. Are you not as hungry as I am? Can we not soon witness how well you kill and feast? Could you not be encouraged to return and slaughter at least one of the three?"

"How do old vultures get old?" Dagget shouted as he ran with the skill of a young bear. "Eyesight first? Wings next? Do you die flying or sleeping?"

"Sir," Azmo sqawked, "we usually die eating . . ."

Dagget laughed and plunged more vigorously ahead, snapping low branches, crushing underbrush as he slammed through the forest, relishing the deception of everlasting strength. The forest never dies; why should I?

Azmo dodged the trees, sometimes flying ahead of Dagget, sometimes just behind. "Kill something!" he shouted down in hungry frustration. "We are almost there, and nothing has been killed! Nothing!" But he could see that Dagget was not listening; he was running as if being pursued.

Approaching Fort Longcrandell in the valley below, Dagget stopped a

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moment on the hillside above the fort and marveled at the lights. Dusk was a fine, deep red on the horizon behind the fort, and the perimeter lights on the walls glowed like shards of yellow glass. He knew electricity. He knew engines. He knew money. But many of the new habits — such as dentistry, mirrors, and clothing — could not bewitch Dagget. Three times before, he had been to the fort and returned home. It was an exciting palace of ideas and dreams, of the bizarre and enigmatic. Standing there under the early stars, he could hear the high noise of a different kind of life coming from the fort.

The fort was an old structure, made of rough timbers in the shape of a huge pentagon seven hundred yards across, with a protective outer ring that was partially charred from a fire a year ago. The fort was the center of trade and culture in the region. Several hundred bears lived there, and on any given day a thousand more came and went. The conference was sure to attract hundreds more.

Dagget took a deep breath and descended the hill. Azmo shuddered in the night air above him. "Hunger, sir," he said. "Do you not hear the rhetoric of my belly, the sound of my weakened condition? To serve you well, I must be significantly full. Our agreement is being sorely tested, sir."

"Be quiet. You'll get your meat."

"In minutes? When? When?"

"Wait up there by the wall, near the blue tower with the other vultures. I'll return."

Azmo flew away to the lighted tower but settled apart from the line of vultures sitting and looking down into the fort. Dagget stepped through the entranceway in the fort wall. An explosion of colors, movement, sounds, smoky lights, and smells opened to him. He was pulled in, rising on his hind legs to be like the crowd, all figures jerking self-consciously around him on stone walkways, hundreds of bears shaved and wearing bushy, tawny coats, some with only their hind legs or their forelegs shaved, others shaved from the waist down or the waist up. He was enthralled with the accumulation of pink skin. He wanted to touch it, lick it, run his paws over the female pinkness, bury his nose in it.

Many of the bears smoked tobacco through red lips and walked arm in arm by the crudely built booths and shops, talking together with wandering eyes. Smoke shot from their noses. Broad-brimmed hats, in lavish purples and greens, were pulled down over one eye. Cloth collars were turned up on leather coats. Green and blue stones were fastened in their ears. Flowers poked from polished neck collars; the eyes of the females that looked at him seemed large and dangerous.

Yet there were bears like Dagget, forest bears, tentative bears, walking

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together and eating hunks of cooked meat on sticks, now and then dropping to all fours to rest their backs. Dagget recognized a few of them in the crowd and wondered if they were there for the conference. "Jacoby." he said to a chestnut-colored bear suddenly walking in front of him with three other bears. He laid his paw on the bear's shoulder and said, "Are you on your way to the conference?"

The bear turned and grinned in surprise. "Dagget, old friend. Have a drink." He thrust out a green bottle. Dagget took it between his paws and gulped down the liquid. It was celery wine, warm and stinging down his throat.

"The conference?" said Jacoby, who had been tutored with Dagget three years ago, before the floods washed the school away. "A modest gathering bent on discussion and sobriety. You won't like it, Dagget. Come with us, to drink and eat." He gestured boldly to introduce the bear on his left, a smaller amber bear with shaved arms and smiling red lips. "Presenting Sylvia, my cousin, and Leroy and Gilbert."

Dagget looked at her smooth, pink arms and then her mouth. She nudged him playfully. "Big Teddy bear, come with us," she said, and he felt his hind legs tighten. Jacoby laughed and pulled Dagget along. "We'll take you to the conference, and boredom will drive you away. You'll see."

They moved through the jovial crowd, passing bottles back and forth. Leroy wore a red silk cummerbund, a silver bracelet, and smelled of gardenias. Gilbert laughed loudly, and was trying to decide whether or not to have his chest and back shaved. He wore a crimson scarf around his neck. "Do it, Gilly," said Sylvia. "It feels wonderful."

"Doesn't it itch?" Dagget asked, and passed the bottle to Sylvia.

"Fish oil," said Jacoby. "Rub a little fish oil on. Prevents dryness, adds a healthy sheen."

"Touch me," said Slyvia, and held out her pink forearm. Dagget touched the tight skin. It was warm, strangely soft and slippery, but almost without sensation. "Fish oil," said Dagget as he ran his paw up to her shoulder. She moved closer to him and murmured something he couldn't understand. The celery wine was sweet on his tongue. His eyes were beginning to dance. How long had it been since he had swallowed so much wine?

"It will always grow back," said Jacoby, bringing the group to a stop near a large doorway. "Here we are, Dagget: your deadly conference."

Through the door windows, Dagget saw a foyer with wooden tables spread with printed material. Behind the tables, four wide doorways opened into a large yellow hall, and on the stage a bear was addressing an audience of about fifty bears seated on folding chairs. Above the stage was a banner proclaiming "THE NEXT

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FIFTY YEARS: DISINTEGRATION OR FULFILLMENT?"

"Having traveled so far . . ." said Dagget with somewhat slurred words, "I should drop in for a few minutes."

The others moaned. Jacoby hushed them and said protectively, "Diligence was what Dagget always broke over the heads of everybody else in school, right, Dagget? Not much wit, but you could climb to the next level of anything with the diligence of a wolverine. Ah, well, stay awhile . . ." He handed Dagget a card. "We'll be at this address for the next few hours. We won't be thinking of you unless you come."

Sylvia pulled Dagget's head down and nibbled his ear. The others hooted with laughter, and then all four disappeared into the noisy crowd. Dagget watched them go, wondering if he would ever be able to return to the forest and his brother. He was dazzled by the forbidden swirl of lights, colors, and smells. The wine had made his belly warm and his mind turn to sand. Did he really lack wit? He entered the hall and took a seat quietly in the last row.

Onstage a large black bear on all fours paused and walked to one side. ". . . therefore, in making our choices," she said in the middle of her talk, "I personally favor what is regarded as the simplicity of our origins. Guided by what we need, and not by what we think we ought to have, our progress then has a maturity to it. It may be that what we learn from all this, in a historical sense, is the ability to say no, to measure the effects of quick change and then say no." She paused and moved to the other side of the stage. She sighed as if a great burden were in their midst. Dagget saw only one shaven bear in the audience. "Yet it seems so difficult," the bear onstage continued, "to leave our dens and caves, to stand upright and wonder how not to emulate the folly of old species, and at the same time to find a new galaxy of ideas to follow . . ."

Dagget leaned forward and whispered to a bear seated in front of him. "Where do I find the free meat?" he asked. Irritated, the bear hissed, "In the foyer, to the left."

Dagget stumbled out of the hall into the foyer. Off to the left was a kitchen area with paper plates of meat on a table. He signed his name to the conference roster, took two plates of meat, and stuffed them into a plastic sack. "Thanks, I'll be back," he told the two bears standing behind the table in white aprons.

Out in the crowd again, he felt exhilarated. He breathed the cold night air and smelled the layers of odors, the meats cooking, perfumes, wines, the musty bodies, the broiling fish, and new-cut timber used for making the booths that lined the lighted walkways. What is the need to take the measure of what is happening? he thought. His mind bubbled. I

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see no need for measuring.

He bought a bottle of celery wine and bumped along through the reveling crowd that seemed to become thicker with each step. When he saw the shaving booths, crowded and filled with gaudy signs depicting a hundred ways to be shaved, he stopped and watched a female bear being shaved from the waist down.

She was on her back on a padded table, her legs spread and saturated with white foam, while a bear with pink arms and glistening scissors and a razor a foot long slowly cut and shaved away the fur. The watching crowd murmured with each stroke of the razor. And another bear, with one eye missing and wearing a bright green silk shirt, massaged fish oil into the fresh pink skin.

Dagget thought he had never seen anything more sensual or beautiful. He looked at the bear; her eyes were closed. Was she asleep? Was she lost in a kind of ecstasy? He took a drink from the wine bottle and wanted to mount her.

He passed as least a dozen shaving booths, all crowded with spectators and customers. It was as if there were an infection in the air, a delirious, impartial heat invading their senses. What would it be like, he thought, to stand totally nude and be sweetly rubbed like a cub with soft fish oil? He tilted his head back and drank from the bottle.

Minutes later he was near the blue tower, facing a line of vultures sitting on the outer fort wall, some asleep, some staring blankly in the dull light. "Azmo?" he said "Which one are you?" None of the birds moved. "Azmo? Where is Azmo, you rope of bloody wretches!"

He picked up a piece of wood and threw it at them. They scattered, all squawking in anger. "Where is my personal vulture?" he shouted. The birds settled back down on the wall. One in the middle, with a voice like breaking bones, said, "Dead he is, down there," and nodded to the other side of the wall.

Dagget lurched out of the fort in the semidarkness. He found Azmo lying on his side at the base of the wall. He knelt beside the bird, clumsily lifting the small, gashed head. "A bag of meat for you, Azmo, and you're dead of starvation," he said. "The timing of a vulture."

The bird suddenly shuddered and stirred; he moaned feebly and opened his eyes, recognizing Dagget. "Sir, they caught me off guard, all six jumped me like vultures," he pleaded.

A voice from the top of the wall said, "The idiot fell. Snoring, he was, and over the side he went like a bag of excrement."

"Lies, sir, all excellent lies," answered Azmo, struggling to his feet and testing his wings. "In the darkness I smell meat," he said with excitement, lifting his beak. Dagget opened the bag and put it in front of

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the groggy bird. Three vultures drifted down from the wall and settled on the ground about ten feet away.

Azmo tore at the meat. Dagget sat down, watching in a haze as the bird ate. "It's not that you're so ugly and crude," he said. "It's that I'm insensitive."

Azmo stopped eating, a piece of meat hanging from his beak. Never before had he been shown kindness or received any kind of gift in his nine years on earth. Am I not supposed to devour it? He was puzzled by kindness. Is this wise to introduce in our partnership? He stared at Dagget, a reciprocal affection touching his small, hard heart. Then he went back to the meat.

"I have to practice charity." said Dagget. "Tolerance . . ." He got up, testing his balance, "I'm considering having myself shaved above the belly, a sort of shirt-shaped shaving . . ." He laughed. "Just to see how it feels, just to do something with my other bears to show my . . . my . . . charity." He shrugged.

Azmo stopped chewing. "Frankly, sir, I couldn't live without my feathers," he said, "but you've got a big chest and your fur will grow back. Give it a shot . . ."

"Sex," said Dagget slowly. "It's always there, too."

He walked away, back into the fort. Azmo called after him, "I'll be right here! . . . Wonderful meat!"

Inside the fort, Dagget went directly through the crowd to the shaving booths. He had to wait in line a half hour before it was his turn. In his mind he formulated explanations to tell his brother, but the wine kept them incomplete, fooling. Overhead a partial moon traveled across the sky while he waited. Soon he would have a moon body and travel lightly. Many bears around him were drunk and loud now, some making love in the shadows behind the booths, others fighting and snarling until the police came and beat them with sticks. He kept his mind on the moon.

When it was his turn, Dagget explained with difficulty that he wanted his chest and back shaved, but not his arms. "You understand that?" he told the shaver, a young bear with aggressive eyes, "not the arms."

He was laid facedown on the smooth table and his back covered with a sweet-smelling foam. He felt the scissors clipping his fur, the paws soothing his aching back. So like being touched by my mother, he thought, licked and fondled, touched and cradled. He sagged into sleep just as the first few razor strokes exposed his skin to a new coolness, the fish oil gently rubbed and rubbed, a wonderful looseness spreading across his back. The noise of the fort diminished and disappeared.

Then he was turned over, the scissors removing the inches of fur on his chest, then the razor slowly releasing his skin. Lying on his back, the full

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effect of the wine carried him into a realm of watery imaginations. He saw Azmo standing free of all his feathers like a plucked chicken; he saw his brother covered with feathers and flying over the fort; he saw the old bear in the forest rendered young again, fully shaved, muscular, the beautiful pinkness of his body covered with blue tattoos of flowers and birds.

Was that Sylvia smiling at him? "Sylvia," he whispered, rising up to meet her. "Sylvia, feel my chest." He felt her paws on him, and his on her, their smoothness combining and weaving together like a bed of silken pillows. "Feel my chest," she whispered, and bit him, and they tumbled down, wrestling with each other in the darkness until he was on her and roaring with blind fury until he exploded. Then he fell away, a long fall that became a melancholy swaying, then sharp and broken, then cold and silent. He pulled himself into himself, rolling into a ball seeking warmth, his head swaying back and forth, back and forth. He died for the rest of the night.

When he awakened, he was on his side in the dirt between two booths. A coldness that he had never felt before gripped him. Azmo was next to him, his claws fastened around a jacket made of lion's mane. Dagget sat up suddenly. The pale light of dawn was faintly coloring the bodies strewn around a sleeping fort. A thin layer of frost stuck to everyone.

"A night to cancel from the memory," said Azmo, "but not too soon. Here, put this on. You're a bloody mess."

Dagget looked down at his body. His chest and arms were shaved. He was covered with scratches and red blotches. he was shivering uncontrollably, his head clogged and dumb with pain. Around him were broken bottles and sleeping bears. He tried to speak but could not. "Put this on," said Azmo, lifting the jacket in the air and dropping it on Dagget. Awkwardly, Dagget slipped his arms into it; he had never worn a jacket. His flesh rubbed against strange fur. His back throbbed with pain.

"What are you going to do?" asked Azmo.

"Go away," Dagget's voice was deep and throaty.

Azmo walked a few yards away and stood silently. Scraps of paper blew across the ground. Bears were snoring nearby. Dagget rolled over and stood uneasily on all fours. Still shaking from cold, he defecated. Then he walked slowly along the pathway. The jacket was too small for him, and the sleeves ended abruptly; his pink ankles were uncovered.

"Where are you going?" asked Azmo.

Dagget walked down the narrow pathway, stepping over the bottles and debris. He walked slowly, favoring his back. "Thanks for the meat," said Azmo, flying in circles around

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him, ". . . partner."

Dagget walked out of the fort and up the hill, heading for the forest. He accepted the misery he felt; yet hadn't it been a wild night? If the shaver had shaved only his chest and back, he wouldn't be so cold now. His chest was tight and stiff, the skin cracking a little. And the celery wine — how could something that had tasted so good now lie in his mouth and body like poison?

"Are you going to kill something?" Azmo asked.

"You!" Dagget yelled.

Azmo screeched with delight even though his belly begged for a juicy breakfast.

A few minutes later the sun edged over the horizon. Dagget broke into a slow run, hoping to force out of his body the cold dullness and lethargy. He kept to the well-worn trail, but within the hour he was breathing with difficulty, the balance of his body thrown off by the coldness that would not subside. He looked for a clearing to put himself in warm sunlight, but couldn't find one.

He stopped, breathing heavily, longing for the warmth of a fire in his cave. He pulled the jacket across his chest to warm his bones; yet how could he walk this way? He felt a strange panic; a sense of engulfment, as if the forest had turned on him.

"Azmo!" he bellowed. "Am I all right?"

Azmo dove out of the sky. "Sunlight, you need sunlight," he said.

"There is none. The forest hides it from me. Find me a place of sunlight before I freeze to death."

Azmo flew up and out of the forest, looking for a clearing or a break in the trees and bushes. He flew in several directions, but any clearing he saw was too far away. He flew back. Dagget was huddled under a tree, his teeth chattering. "Build a fire," he pleaded. "Build a fire." The look in his eyes was filled with fear.

"With what?" said Azmo, "my reputation?"

"Prove your worth," said Dagget, his eyes pleading for help, his teeth chattering.

"Your cold joins your fear, and you are twice as cold."

"Prove your worth," Dagget whispered.

Azmo lifted himself off the ground and flew above the forest. Prove my worth, he thought, to a bear stupid enough to get himself shaved? The fort would be only minutes away, he knew, and there maybe he could find a small log or branch glowing in the embers of a forgotten fire. He would carry it back, and together, vulture and bear, they would build a fire.

He would do this for the pathetic Dagget. The bear had brought him meat, had shaken him from unconsciousness. He had experienced kindness as something interesting. Now, instead of lingering nearby in hopes of his death, he would work to keep

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the bear alive. But of course, death was inevitable; it was the vulture's smelly old friend, the tasty gift of life.

The fort was still quiet with sleep as he flew over it and searched the smoking ashes of each fire pit for a partially burned branch. But only coals remained. He found a tin bucket and ingeniously scooped it full of hot coals, ignoring the sleeping bodies huddled around the pits, and then started back for the forest.

He flew too far south; then doubled back and lost his landmarks. Eagles are better navigators, he knew; vultures keep themselves within a smaller, familiar radius — unless, of course, bigger opportunities such as wars or famines present themselves farther away. Now he searched for the tree with the bent top. His stomach was growling.

He swooped low, catching out of one eye the movement of two or three bears below. He angled left, descended carefully, and glided between two trees out of the sunlight and came to a stop twenty feet above the bears below in the underbrush. Two of the bears were resting; the third bear, older and bigger, stood off to one side, his head swaying back and forth, back and forth, his voice moaning. Azmo looked closer. Fresh blood covered his mouth and chest. His foreleg was gashed.

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Well, thought Azmo, as he flew up from the tree and above the forest, it has happened again. He saw the tree with the bent top and flew down. Dagget lay next to it in a heap, his throat slashed open, exposing sinew and muscle, the pink skin of his broken chest dripping with crimson softness. Azmo placed the bucket of coals nearby and stood next to Dagget's lifeless body. The bear had not gone quietly; he had fought some, then perhaps resigned himself. There is enough here for a dozen vultures, thought Azmo, his stomach aching.

He stood staring for a few moments. You can't do it, can you? he questioned himself. Wasn't he a bear of some redemption? Stupid, yes, but kind. He could never explain it to other vultures. Perhaps another bear like this would come along someday. Certainly the vultures would soon be along to feast.

He gathered enough dry underbrush to cover Dagget's body, packing it carefully around him. Then he spilled the bucket of coals onto it. The breezes did the rest, fanning the smoke into flames. Is that warm enough? he joked.

He stayed nearby until the heat was too much. Branches above Dagget were on fire, then the tree burst into flames. Then Azmo flew up, above the blazing forest.

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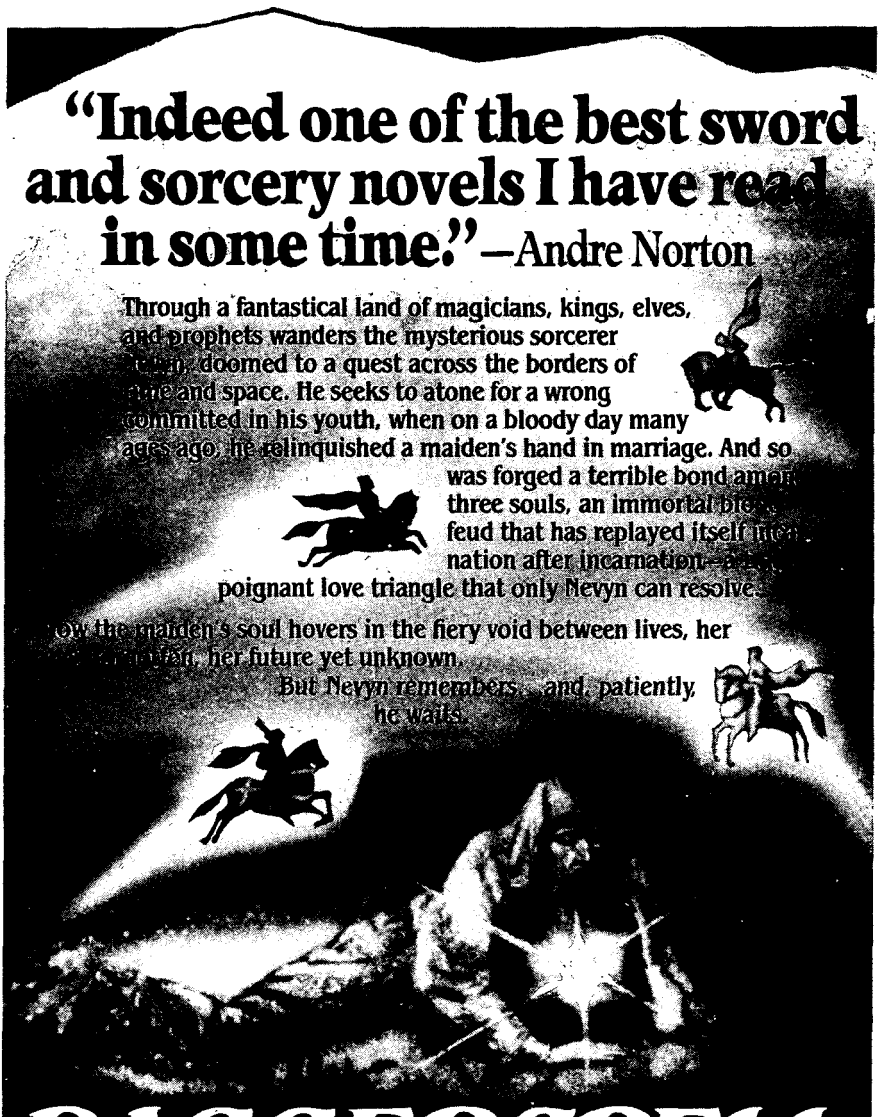

DAGGERSPELL

Katharine Kerr

DOUBLEDAY

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This tale — about a decidedly offbeat Political Action Committee — makes a surprising yet logical connection between a political campaign and a favorite fantasy theme . . .

Business As Usual

BY
BILL JOHNSON

The night Broca made his move, I was stuffed into a tight suit for a fund-raising cocktail party. The Governor — trim, gray-haired, and distinguished as hell — looked the part of a presidential candidate. A fat woman had him cornered, and I was about to launch a rescue party when I noticed her dress was designer and guessed her diamonds were real. I shrugged and avoided his eye when he tried to signal. We all have to suffer sometimes. And the campaign needed the money.

Instead, I wandered by the bar, three-deep in the husbands who wrote the checks to keep their wives happy, and made sure the scotch was well-watered. I turned to leave when I saw Broca.

I admit I winced. Early in the campaign we put out a set of position papers. One of them, the Governor's personal favorite, brought up the old idea of a nuclear freeze. I tried to talk him out of it, said the issue had been dead for at least a decade, but he could be stubborn as an Ozark mule when he wanted.

Broca's PAC sent a contribution when the Governor's idea stirred some interest. Unfortunately, Broca's was the only PAC to contribute.

Broca's skin was red and splotchy, and his gums stretched back to expose his teeth like fangs. I wondered what disease he had, and never shook his hand. His PAC, however, wrote checks of the purest green.

"Mr. Broca, how nice to—"

"You're losing in the polls," Broca said abruptly.

"—see you,"

"The Governor's positions have a great deal of support. He is not, however, identified with these positions.

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He lacks visibility," Broca complained.

Candy to a baby, kickbacks to a government contractor, money to a campaign manager. The smell of some things just wakes you *up*.

"I couldn't agree more. But visibility takes money," I said smoothly.

"How much?" he asked.

I named a moderately ridiculous number and hoped for a tenth of that. Broca nodded and wrote a check. I stared at the numbers and decided to do my good deed for the day. I went over and asked the fat lady if she wanted to dance.

I almost froze off my . . . I mean, it was cold as a ditchdigger's. . . . Anyway, New Hampshire was not my favorite state.

Until primary day.

Second. What a beautiful word. Second. I couldn't believe it. and the other surprise candidate, the woman, came in first.

The media went wild. If there was anything better than a close race, it was a close race between two unknown candidates. Suddenly they had a chance to write new copy about a fresh face.

The PAC money began to roll in, and the individual contributions, and federal matching funds. But as fast as it came in, there was always something to spend it on.

So I went to the campaign suite to talk about Broca, and found the Governor in the bathroom, throwing up blood.

No one was sure why the Governor got the ulcers. Hell, no one was even sure they were ulcers. A biopsy showed healthy tissue that, well, just bled. Most of the time the Governor was all right, but lately things hadn't been looking so good.

"How bad is it?" I asked.

"Bad enough," the Governor said as he wiped blood from his lips.

"Maybe," I said, choosing my words carefully, "we should relax now, pass up Florida, and save ourselves for the big western primaries."

The Governor shook his head. He knew as well as I did that he had to contest Florida, and every state from here on out, if he wanted to win the nomination in Denver.

"All right, then I'm going to send you to a private little fund-raiser. Broca's group, if you remember him. It should be a nice, relaxing evening . . ."

The Governor was drunk.

Well, his breath did smell like garlic, not booze, but he staggered, his eyes were glassy, and he was pale as a sheet. I figured it must have been a good party.

I got him to his room, stripped him, and put him to bed. I used some toilet paper on his neck where he seemed to have cut himself shaving. I carefully flushed the paper down the toilet, just so no rumors would start

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with some loudmouthed maid, and checked him one last time before I left. He was talking in his sleep, and he felt like he had a little fever.

"He says four hundred years. Couldn't believe it. Made me believe it. And he's never sick. Not once. Goddam, think of the good you could do in four hundred years. Never even hurt anybody. Goddam."

"He's dying."

I damn near choked on my lettuce. Broca just sat there with this pissed-off look on his face.

"You said he was healthy. You said there was nothing to worry about."

"I don't understand," I lied. If Broca cut off his PAC money, or if he went to the press . . .

"We had your Governor checked out last night. A thorough physical. He's dying."

"The cut on his neck. You took a blood sample," I said.

"No, that's part of the treatment," Broca said uncomfortably.

"Treatment? You can cure him? A PAC of doctors. But why not use the official medical PAC?" I asked.

Broca tapped the ash off his cigarette and stared out the window. The night lights of the city spread out below us like fireflies over a lake.

"Have you ever heard of porphyria? It's a disease, a severe shortage of red blood cells. Porphyriacs can't stand sunlight, their gums recede like mine, and some other, more unpleasant problems occur. In the Middle Ages they came out only at night, and they drank blood to get their red count up. They were the original 'vampires.' "

"So you have this disease and you set up your own PAC. A PAC of vampires. Well, that's legal," I said calmly. *Oh my God,* I thought, ***what have I done? The Baptists will kill us if they find out.***

"What is important is that, yes, we can cure him, but we're not sure we should. The treatment is safe and harmless, but we don't really have porphyria. We have the symptoms of the disease, but ours is different. It's viral, and if we cure your Governor, we have to infect him and he automatically becomes one of us."

"You mean he'll look like you?" I asked. I thought about television and shuddered. Better we should withdraw now.

"No, the virus will cure his disease first. It's only when firmly established that the outer features start to change. It will take about a decade before he looks like me," Broca said.

A decade was enough for two terms. And during that time, if anyone noticed, we could claim stress of the office.

"Why the Governor? Why save him?" I asked.

"We support a nuclear freeze," Broca said. "That may sound strange, but we have a problem. Our popula-

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tion is linked to yours.

"We need a particular blood factor to live. Each time we tap into a person for that blood, their immune system is suppressed. By the third time, the immune system is weakened enough for the virus to establish itself. Then the donor is one of us.

"We need a large human population to survive, to ensure that we don't turn too many donors into one of us. If the balance tips and we don't have enough donors, we die in an extremely unpleasant manner.

"And we can't think of anything that would reduce the population faster than a nuclear war."

"So you want to keep us alive, like cattle?" I said.

"That is precisely the attitude that keeps us quiet!" Broca said angrily. "No, you're not like cattle! We're human, too, and we're citizens, but we're different. And groups that are different tend to get killed. So it took a lot of courage for us to come out in public and try to help, and I'll be damned if I'll listen to you insult us!"

"Sit down!" I said. Broca slowly returned to his chair.

"All right. I don't particularly want to be blown to hell either. First, cure the Governor. He seems to have hit a nerve with the freeze idea, but it needs him out front to keep pushing. And to keep pushing, you've got to keep winning," I said. Broca sighed and smiled.

"And to keep winning, you need money," Broca said. He took out his checkbook.

For the first time in the conversation, I felt comfortable. Like candy to a baby . . .

All right, maybe I should have paid more attention. But it was time for the Florida primary, and after that Super Tuesday and Super Monday and Texas, all leading up to California.

And then the convention in Denver.

The field was down to two candidates, the Governor and the woman, Marilyn Norton. Neither had enough delegates to win on the first ballot. That meant backroom deals, and promises, and the kind of action that a campaign manager got once in a lifetime.

The Governor finished the treatments with Broca, and the years seemed to drop off his face. He seemed stronger and healthier than he had in years. Everything was going our way.

I knew it was too good to last.

I thanked the investigator and paid him off. He offered to do more digging, but I had the uneasy feeling that I didn't want to know the answers. This didn't mean I wasn't going to find out, just that I wanted only one person to know. Like the old Russian saying that if three people get together to talk revolution, one is a fool, one is a saint, and one is a spy.

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Marilyn Norton did not exist.

Oh, she was there, all right — in the records. Birth, parents, school records, all the paper trail we leave through our life — but when the investigator tried to find those people, they did not exist.

The hospital where she claimed to have been born was torn down. Her old high school was an adult day-care center. All her close relatives seemed to be dead.

"She doesn't exist, Broca. She's not really alive."

"Who?"

"Marilyn Norton, the other candidate. And she's amazingly alive for someone who doesn't exist. Hell, I danced with her at the opening ceremonies last night."

Silence on the line. Not even static.

"Broca?"

"Hmm?"

"Is there something funny going on? With Marilyn Norton?"

"I think you should arrange a meeting. Just you and me and Norton and . . . any adviser she wants to bring."

"Broca, is she a vampire?"

"God, no! That's one thing you don't have to worry about."

I hung up and poured myself a scotch. I sat for a moment, let the aroma bring back memories and smiles, then I sighed and poured it down the sink and refilled the glass with water. The last thing I needed was a hangover.

Broca and I met the opposition in a private room in the back of a restaurant. Denver spread out to the east, a cup of light between the mountains and the plains. We clearly saw the Convention Center, where the first ballot was indecisive.

I thought we could win. Norton had more committed delegates than the Governor, but I didn't think her campaign manager knew how to pick up uncommitted votes. Hell, I'd already promised Defense and Treasury to four state chairmen.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Norton said. She was a handsome woman, tall and dark. Her adviser sat next to her, a shorter woman, dressed in black.

"Yes," I said.

"But you wonder how much it's worth for either of us if we come out of the convention with a party more interested in ripping itself apart than winning an election. I agree. That's why we're here," she said.

"You're very astute. That's exactly what I was thinking," I said.

"I know," she said.

"*I will not sit here and eat with that man!*" her adviser shouted.

We can't talk with these people," Broca complained. "There is such a thing as professional courtesy, and only an amateur ignores that. I won't deal with amateurs."

"Amateur. Amateur!" the adviser shrieked.

"Witch!"

"Vampire!"

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"I gather you know each other," I said dryly.

"He was there in Salem, during the witch trials, and he did nothing," the adviser said.

"And what did you want us to do?" Broca asked.

"I could think of a few things . . ."

I looked sharply at Norton. She smiled and shrugged.

"So we both have skeletons in the closet, so to speak," she said. "No, I can't read your mind all that well when you try to hide your thoughts. And we witches, like the vampires, have spent most of our time trying to stay out of the public eye. We don't know how to get elected, even if we can read minds and do . . . other things. I think you're the person to see that the election gets done. No matter who supports me."

Well, I always did want that office in the West Wing of the White House. And no one said it was going to be easy.

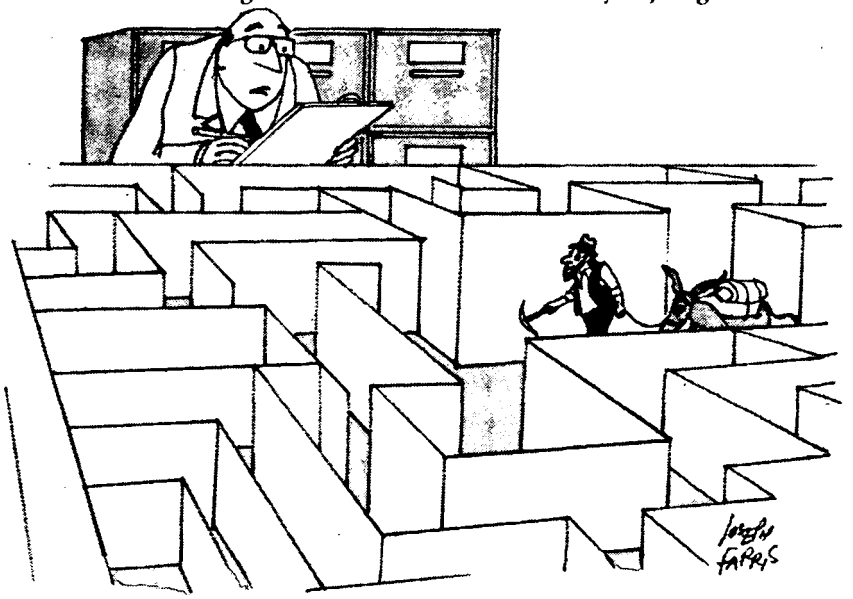
"Broca!"

"Yes?"

"Who else are we likely to run into in this campaign?" I asked plaintively. He pursed his lips and looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Well, there are the werewolves. They need all that space for hunting, you see, so they tend to have large estates and join country clubs. I suppose they support the other party, but I've never heard of them getting involved in politics before. And then there are the herbalists; you call them witch doctors . . ."

Sometimes you just got to deal.



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Mike Ashley, who is working on a biography of the famous English fantasy writer and broadcaster Algernon Blackwood, sent us this "lost" Blackwood story, along with a note on its background (see Afterword).

At A Mayfair Luncheon

BY
ALGERNON BLACKWOOD

On looking back, it seemed incredible to young Monson that this could have come out of such commonplace conditions. For it started while he was reading poetic stuff about the Pæstum Temples, and then about the temples of Baalbec and the worship of Jupiter Ammon, and his thoughts had run off waywardly towards Christ and Buddha, and he had been wondering vaguely — Man in the Street that he was — how such vital and terrific forms of belief and worship could ever die — when, abruptly, someone came into his study with a tiresome interruption:

"This note come by 'and, please, sir, and would you please answer immedshately, thank you, sir."

Monson acted immedshately and read the note:

"*Do* forgive me, dear. I'm a man short. 1:15 for 1:30. If you *can* . . . *do*.

FELICITY."

Now, he believed he loved Felicity. He could. He did.

"Telephone immedshately to her ladyship to say Mr. Monson will be delighted to lunch today at 1:15," he gave his answer. And in due course he went.

FURTHER, it lies quite beyond him to explain why all the way to Curzon Street, walking leisurely this fine May morning, he was still aflame with Baalbec, the Pyramids, the Pæstum Temples, and all that sort of delicious ancient, romantic pagan stuff. Imagination ran that way. He left it at that. Some old-world glamour caught him away into some strange, wild heaven. He found himself suddenly loathing

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the modern drabness, the senseless speed, the artificial mechanism, the clever, infinite invention that was smart and up-to-date, and all the rest of the rushing, uncomfortable nonsense. Machinery did everything, the individual nothing. A deep yearning possessed him for the slow, worthwhile, steady liveableness of other days, when a man could believe in a mountain nymph on many-fountained Ida and worship her, by God, with a conviction of positive reaction. He heard the old, old winds among the olives and saw the spindrift blow across great Triton's horn, his sandals trod upon acanthus leaves, the wild thyme stung his nostrils. . . .

IN which ridiculous, even hysterical mood, he rang the bell in Curzon Street at 1:15 and waited upon admittance.

So ordinary was the next step, and the routine of the steps following, that he found nothing to remark upon them.

"So sweet of you to come and save me. Lord Falsestep had a sudden Cabinet Meeting. . . . I think you know everybody. . . ."

He caught instantly the usual deadly savour. The cocktails and the preliminary chatter shared this deadliness, so that he found himself harking back to Baalbec and Pæstum and his earlier foolishness, when, suddenly a late guest was announced, but in such a way that both his eye and ear were caught, held, arrested — what *is* the precise word? — startled is probably the most accurate, but, at any rate, taken with vivid painfulness.

"Painfulness?" Yes, assuredly, because it hurt. A sharp, terrible sting ran through him from head to foot. Something in him blenched, ran hot and cold, with an effect of dislocation somewhere, so that his heart seemed to stop.

Some Bright Young Thing, or its equivalent, chanced to engage him at the moment, though "engage" is wrong because the trivial glitter held no power of any sort, and glitter is at best a surface quality. It was, at any rate, while exchanging glittering vacancies thus, that he heard the footman's voice and turned to look.

To look! Rather to stare. Was it man or woman, this late guest? Such outlines, he knew, were easily interchangeable today. It might have been one or the other. "Or both," ran like fiery lightning through him, so that he turned faint with the sweetness of some amazing apprehension.

The chatter in his ear seemed suddenly miles away, and not miles alone, but ages. Its tinkle reached him, none the less, distinctly enough: ". . . so you simply *must* come. It will be too adorable. Without *you* it would be just ashes. Wear anything you like, of course, and doors open till dawn . . ."

The Bright Young Thing's invitation, yes, oozing past her violent lip-

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stick reached him distinctly enough, though it now had a sharply hideous sound — because at the same moment he had caught the voice of the late arrival: *"Thank you for asking me,"* and the words, so softly spoken, had a quality that made them sing above the general roar.

Why then, did a wave of life rush drenching through him as he heard them? Why did his bones seem to melt and run to gold and silver? Whence came that breath of flower-laden wind across the drowned atmosphere of smoke and female perfume? That tang as of sea and desert air that for a moment seemed too sweet, too strong, to bear?

". . . you promise. I'll expect you," clanged the invitation.

"Of course, I shall be delighted," came his mechanical acceptance. "And I'll be there before dawn."

They turned away mutually — he, because he felt curiously shamed a trifle — she, because a young man with a lisping voice approached with a wobbling glass. Shamed perhaps, yet faint as well, faint towards the Mayfair room and atmosphere, but at the same time so alive and exhilarated toward something else that he was intoxicated. He caught at the edge of a sofa to hold him down. He had a fear that he must rise to touch a star, a nebula, an outer galaxy.

THERE was confusion inextricable, then somehow they were all in the ultra-luxurious dining-room, and Felicity, his friend's wife whom he believed he loved, was dropping a hurried whisper in his ear:

"You are an angel, darling, to come. A woman has failed me too — that impossible Ursula again. Do you mind terribly? No, Lovely, on your left. Just an empty chair . . . !"

And so it was that the space next to him was unoccupied, an empty chair, just beyond which, he realized with a lift of his whole being, sat the late arrival whose voice, with its singing beauty, had swept Today into the rubbish heap.

Now, until this moment, young Monson — young as well as simple he assuredly was — had held full command of himself, since he had eschewed strong drink and was besides frankly bored, even feeling sorry he had come at all. And boredom engenders pessimism, not optimism. At the same time, contrariwise, it awakens a sense of superiority, false of course, yet compensating, because the mind comforts itself thereby that it is superior to the cause of its boredom. And until that amazing voice had echoed across the room packed with notables and nobodies, young Monson's mood was as stated, below par — bored a little. The Bright Young Thing had exasperated with her affectations. His spirits, though for the sake of politeness to Felicity, his lovely hostess, he had forced them to

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spurious activity, were distinctly low. There was nothing, therefore, to account for the stupendous, gripping interest he now felt suddenly in that empty space, the breadth of an unoccupied chair, that gaped — otherwise somewhat menacingly — between him and his neighbour. The interest and stimulus lay in this: that across the narrow emptiness the stranger sat. One other thing lay equally beyond his explanation — that, instead of the sense of false superiority referred to, he was aware now of inferiority in himself that wakened a humility of heart so deep and genuine that he found no honestly descriptive words.

How calm, gentle, silent, almost meek, yet never uncomfortable nor out of place, the stranger sat there, and not in any smallest degree embarrassed. Entirely self-possessed, moreover. He might have been the host, a careless, understanding host, whose carelessness and understanding derived from the certain knowledge that all were glad to be there. Yes, it was a *be,* Monson now knew, a guest quite unimpressed by the fact that this was the luncheon of a famous social and political hostess, and that "those present" would be blazoned tomorrow with photographs in the daily press. Meek, perhaps, yet how strangely powerful, how radiant, and — the words seem childish — how beautiful, with a power and beauty beyond crumbling Baalbec and the wind-worn Pyramids. And upon some scale of mightiness that dislocated his mind perhaps a little, since a perfect blizzard of unrelated pictures suddenly swept and poured across his thoughts like an immense panorama, pictures all scaled to mightiness, so that his being seemed stretched to capacity to receive them, packed thus into a single flashing second. They roared up, passed, were gone, all simultanously . . . great Stonehenge with its ache of grandeur, Pæstum with its rapture, the ghastly loneliness of the Easter Island images, the unanswerable Sphinx and Pyramids, and then, with a leap of terror, to the crystal iciness of the deserted moon, the awful depths of the nine-mile ocean bed . . . roared past and vanished again, as he stole a glance, wondering how for Felicity's sake, his anxious hostess whom he loved, he might approach his neighbour with a word.

On the stranger's further side, he saw, perched an empty-headed Duchess, avoiding him deliberately. He met Felicity's beseeching eye. He made a plunge across that gaping chair:

"We must bridge this empty space," he ventured smilingly, leaning over a little. "Some lady evidently has been detained. The stress of London life just now is hard upon punctuality . . ."

Something of the sort he said. The words rather tumbled from his

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mouth. There was a scent of wild thyme as he leaned over slightly.

The other smiled, lifting clear, shining eyes, so that young Monson admitted to something again akin to shock, a singular deep thrill of wonder, beauty, humility. Was it man or woman after all? shot through his mind.

"Not detained perhaps," the answer floated to him, "but unaware. Not dead, that is, but sleeping."

Oddly, there was no shock of surprise at the choice of curious words a foreigner might have found, or one unaccustomed to modern usage, and Monson felt he had merely misunderstood perhaps. The voice was soft as music, very low.

"Late, at any rate," he murmured in some confusion, his eyes upon his place, as though in search of steadiness. "Too late," he added, his search for the commonplace still operating, "for this delicious lobster *mousse*—or whatever it may be."

That sweet, gentle smile again, that scent and purity of wild flowers, as he crumbled his bread and gazed across the narrow space towards his young neighbour, who sat unaccountably trembling before something he had never known before. Trembling, it seemed to himself, with happiness and wonder, yet with a touch of awe due to the new sense of power and splendour that rose in his heart. In his heart alone, yes, not in his mind. He established *that,* at any rate. His mind, if watchful perhaps and steady enough, seemed suddenly inoperative. What happened, what was happening, lay in the heart alone. Thus he found no explanation, as equally no doubt or question, about seeing those slender fingers radiant, the breadcrumbs shining upon the table beneath the other's touch, nor why, though raised repeatedly to his mouth, they multiplied on the cloth even while he took from them. . . .

THE eye of Felicity from the top of the long table flared at him.

Since the stranger offered nothing, Monson, making a desperate effort to get at his mind, rather than allow his heart full sway, tried again after a moment's interval. To entertain one's neighbour was the acknowledged price of admission to any feast, to sit silent, at any rate, was not permissible. Again, the words fell tumbling from his lips without reflection, or rather from his heart:

"My plans for today were otherwise," he mumbled, almost stammeringly, leaning over a little as before. "I didn't really want to come, but I'm *awfully* g-glad I did. It's so difficult to — to live one's own life and — and keep in the swim nowadays." He paused, watching a smile that opened in those glorious eyes, yet did not travel downwards to the tender lips. "I was summoned at the last moment because some Cabinet Minister and a

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lady failed," he fumbled on, "but I wouldn't have missed it for — for— everything in the world."

He stopped dead. The other's lips were moving. There was a light about the face and head.

"I myself was asked indirectly perhaps, but in true sincerity. And none call on me in vain."

These were the actual words, spoken so low as to be just audible, that floated across the space of the empty chair. It seemed only a glance from Felicity's eye along the table length that held young Monson to his seat.

"Poor hostesses," he thinks he heard himself murmuring, attempting a smile of charitable understanding. For at the same instant, turning abruptly, he met the other's eyes at the full. One look he saw, a look of fire and glory like dawn upon the Caucasus . . . and then a sense of fading, the passing away of an intolerable radiance that for a moment had forced his eyelids to drop. Yet in that fraction of a second, before they lifted again, the words came floating in a still, small voice that made them absolutely clear:

"From her heart, it came. 'Oh, Christ,' she prayed, 'Do please, come. I need you.' "

THERE was a stir in the room, a shuffling along the table, as Sir Thomas and Lady Ursula Smith-Ponsonby arrived with many apologies and slid gracefully into the two empty chairs on young Monson's left.

AFTERWORD TO "AT A MAYFAIR LUNCHEON"

During 1945, when August Derleth was corresponding with Algernon Blackwood with a view to publishing a volume of previously unreprinted material, Blackwood made a rather odd statement. He had already sent Derleth two unpublished stories, "The Doll" and "The Trod" which would become the slim Arkham House volume *The Doll and One Other* (1946). Derleth asked what else might be available to which Blackwood responded:

Here I am not very hopeful; I think all my volumes of short, or long-short stories have already been issued in USA; and, alas, I have no new unpublished ones ready or in view.

That was written on February 28th 1945. Only five months earlier Blackwood had read a new short story on "The Wednesday Story" spot on the BBC Home Service called "The Castlebridge Cat", a story which was then and is even now, unpublished. And that wasn't the only one. Although "Lock Your Door" was not broadcast on the BBC Home Service until May 1946, it had been written for some time. Had Blackwood

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just overlooked these stories or did he not feel them of sufficient quality for publication? It the latter was true, then it was also true of "The Trod" for in an earlier letter to Derleth, Blackwood had made a point of saying he did not think the story had much merit.

Whichever was the reason, Blackwood certainly misled Derleth. Derleth was interested in any stories not previously published in the United States and of these there were many. Blackwood's writing career was long and varied, and it's easy for memory to mistakenly telescope it into the decade before the First World War when the bulk of his short fiction appeared, including the classic stories "The Wendigo" and "The Willows" as well as the John Silence occult detective cases. After the War, Blackwood concentrated on novels and children's stories but adult short stories continued to appear, and his last collection, *Shocks,* was published in 1935. Apart from the slim Arkham House volume one might believe that Blackwood's writing career ceased with *Shocks.* But this was far from the case. All through the years of the Second World War Blackwood worked on stories, talks and plays for the BBC and became a notable broadcaster. After the War he extended this to television and in 1948 received the Television medal as Most Outstanding Personality.

After the publication of *Shocks* and before Derleth brought out *The Doll and One Other,* Blackwood completed eight short stories and was certainly working on others. Not one of these eight has been reprinted in subsequent collections of Blackwood stories and, to all intents, have become lost.

"At a Mayfair Luncheon" was one of the first stories written after the *Shocks* volume had been completed. It was sold to Harry Golding, editor of the prestigeous *Windsor Magazine* in September 1935 and was published in the March 1936 issue. Blackwood had written it in July 1935 while staying with Captain Boylan at Drogheda in the Irish Republic, so the story had sold fairly quickly. Blackwood seemed of a different opinion, however. Writing to his agent, A. P. Watt, in July 1936, over the sale of "The Man-Eater" to Leo Margulies's *Thrilling Mystery,* he commented: "I had long ago given it up, like 'Mayfair Luncheon' as dead and buried."

And indeed, for fifty years, "At a Mayfair Luncheon" has remained 'dead and buried', but undeservedly so. It does not have the cosmic thrill so evident in his earlier stories, but it does possess a subtle mood which creates its own atmosphere of wonder. If anything the story was

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before its time and it may well have been for that reason that there came a lack of response to the story and caused Blackwood to file it at the back of his mind and probably forget all about it when Derleth's enquiry arrived.

MIKE ASHLEY,
Walderslade,
February 1985

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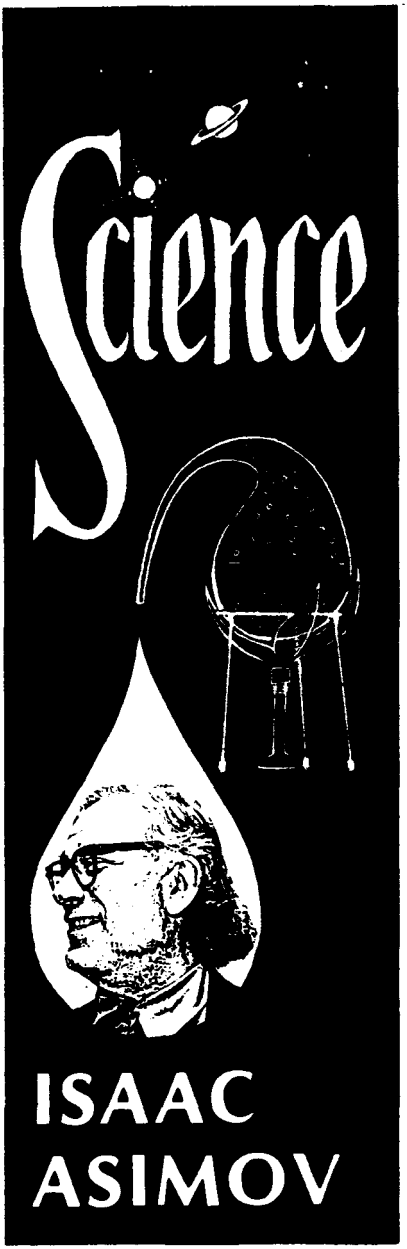

THE ENEMY WITHIN

Lester del Rey is a top-notch science fiction writer, editor, and critic. He is one of the most straightforward, the most honest, and the most intelligent people I know. He is also, I am glad to say, one of my oldest friends. I've known him for forty-five years.

In that interval, of course, he has grown forty-five years older and I have grown four of five years older myself.

Our relationship is a peculiar one. If we two are alone, there is nothing between us but warmth and friendship. As soon as a third person shows up on the horizon, however, things instantly change. Lester bares his teeth and lets me have it.

As I have said, over and over, "Lester will give me the shirt off his back. What he won't give me is a kind word."

Of course, you mustn't get the wrong idea. I give as good as I get. I'm waiting for him, someday, to say, "Here, Isaac. Here's the shirt off my back."

In which case, I'm going to say, and I can hardly wait, "Off *your* back, who would want it?"

Anyway, we were taping a television interview together some years ago, and we both talked sensibly and maintained the utmost decorum. You would think we were each of us entirely respectable.

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And then, as the program approached an end, the nice woman who was interviewing us turned to me and said, "I understand, Dr. Asimov, that you don't fly. It seems strange that someone who travels all over the Galaxy in his imagination should not fly. Why is that?"

I am terribly tired of that question, but I answered, in a civil manner, "It's simply an irrational fear."

Whereupon, Lester, who had controlled himself for nearly half an hour, broke down and said, "Otherwise known as cowardice. As for me, I'm ready to fly at any time."

At which, totally forgetting we were on television, I shot back at him, "That's because your life is worth *nothing*, Lester."

With that, the program was over, and the young woman, grinning, thanked us both. A wave of sick feeling came over me, however, as I suddenly realized, very clearly, that we were going to be on television that night and my dear wife, Janet, was going to be watching.

As it happens, she is very fond of Lester. I thought, rather nervously, that I had better break the news to her diplomatically.

So I called her up and explained what had happened.

She said, appalled, "You said that on *television*!" And then, because she has a heart as soft as chinchilla fur, she began to weep.

I called Lester over and said, "Please, Lester, tell her you didn't mind."

Lester tried very hard, but she wouldn't stop and the whole next day, she kept looking at me and saying, "You said it on *television*."

I was finally desperate enough to make a logical point. I said, "Well, Lester started it."

And she trumped my ace with a logical remark of her own. "That's no excuse," she said.

Well, now that I've thought of that episode (I just talked to Lester on the phone, and that reminded me), I'd better get my mind off it. I'll talk about carbon-14.

I've been talking about isotopic tracers in one way or another for three consecutive essays so far and this will make the fourth. Last month, I told you about the unexpected discovery that carbon-14 was a rather long-lived radioisotope, with a half-life of 5,730 years.

Since the half-life is that long, and since carbon is the element most centrally involved in life, you can see that carbon-14 became, at once, the most important tracer in biochemistry.

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If the half-life was all there was, however, there would be no carbon-14 in the natural environment today. A half life of 5,730 years is long when compared to a human lifetime, or even when compared to the history of civilization.

Writing was invented about 3000 B.C. If a pound of carbon-14 were placed under the first bit of clay into which cuneiform was incised, and both objects were left undisturbed to the present day, then about half a pound of carbon-14 would still be in existence today.

The half-life, however, is not long compared to geologic ages. If the entire Earth were a solid mass of carbon-14, every bit of it would break down, to the last few atoms, in just about a million years; and a million years is only 1/4,600 of the lifetime of the Earth. If, then, carbon-14 were formed, in any way, more than a million years ago, then no matter how much of the isotope had then existed, there would be none left now.

We know of no way in which carbon-14 might be formed in Earth's past that would not be operative today as well. Therefore, if there is no natural way in which carbon-14 is formed on Earth now, there was no natural way in which it was formed at any time, and no carbon-14 should exist on Earth except for the tiny quantities that scientists can make in the laboratory.

But there *is* a small quantity of carbon-14 in nature, and this can only be because some process is manufacturing it *right now*.

In 1934, the Latvian-American chemist Aristid V. Grosse, then 29 years old, suggested that cosmic rays interact with the atoms of the atmosphere to produce nuclear reactions that might result in the production of radioisotopes without human intervention.

Investigation eventually showed that this was so. The cosmic ray particles that enter the upper atmosphere (the "primary radiation") are the positively charged nuclei of atoms, speeding along at about 99 percent of the speed of light. About nine-tenths of the particles are the nuclei of hydrogen atoms, that is, simple protons.

The protons (and the scattering of more massive nuclei) sooner or later collide with atoms, and do so very energetically because of their speeds. The nuclei they collide with are smashed and produce particles of "secondary radiation," somewhat less energetic than the primary radiation, but still energetic enough. Among the particles of this secondary radiation are neutrons.

Every once in a while, one of these neutrons strikes a nucleus of

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nitrogen-14 (the major component of the atmosphere). The neutron knocks a proton out of the nucleus, while remaining in the nucleus itself. The nitrogen-14 is made up of seven protons and seven neutrons. If a proton leaves as a neutron enters, the result is a nucleus with six protons and eight neutrons, and that is carbon-14. For convenience, we might also call it "radiocarbon."

The radiocarbon, once formed, quickly combines with oxygen, and the result is radiocarbon dioxide.

Naturally, the carbon-14 atoms in the radiocarbon dioxide break down eventually. Inside the carbon-14 nucleus, a neutron changes into a proton. A beta particle (a speeding electron) is emitted and the nucleus becomes nitrogen-14 again. In the process, the nitrogen atom is torn from the oxygen, and we're back where we were before the cosmic rays struck.

Meanwhile, however, the cosmic ray particles are producing more neutrons that are converting more nitrogen-14 to carbon-14. An equilibrium is reached in which just as many carbon-14 atoms are being formed as are being broken down. The total amount of carbon-14 atoms in the atmosphere (in the form of radiocarbon dioxide) then remains constant.

The equilibrium amount of carbon-14 in the atmosphere is very small, but radioactivity is easy to detect and that amount can be measured. It seems that one out of every 540,000,000,000 carbon atoms in the atmosphere is carbon-14.

That certainly doesn't sound like much, but the Earth has a lot of atmosphere. Even though very little of it is carbon dioxide, and only part of the carbon dioxide is carbon, and though only a very occasional carbon atom is carbon-14, there is still about 1300 kilograms (or nearly 1½ tons) of carbon-14 in the atmosphere altogether.

Nor is all of the Earth's content of carbon-14 in the atmosphere. Some carbon dioxide is dissolved in the ocean, and with it some radiocarbon dioxide is also dissolved.

What's more, plants absorb carbon dioxide as the raw material out of which their tissues are built up. Naturally, they absorb radiocarbon dioxide along with ordinary carbon dioxide, since carbon-14 has chemical properties that are identical to those of stable carbon-12 and carbon-13.

Then, too, animals eat plants and incorporate plant constituents into their own tissues, including any carbon-14 that is there. In the end,

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there is carbon-14 in all life forms without exception.

Slowly, the carbon-14 in living tissue breaks down but, slowly, new carbon-14 atoms enter from the atmosphere (in the case of plants) or from food (in the case of animals). Therefore, the carbon-14 in living tissue remains constant in concentration — at least while the tissues are alive.

Once an organism dies, however, it can no longer take in carbon-14 from either the atmosphere or food. It is stuck with whatever carbon-14 it had in its tissues at the time of death, and that carbon-14 slowly and inexorably breaks down.

We know precisely the rate at which carbon-14 breaks down, and we can detect and recognize the beta particles it gives off. From the number of beta particles we can count, we know the amount of carbon-14 in a given sample of a dead remnant of something that was once living. By comparing the amount with that contained in live matter, we can calculate for how long the carbon-14 has been breaking down and, therefore, for how long the dead material has been dead.

Naturally, this doesn't work where dead organisms are eaten, and their carbon-14 is absorbed into the tissues of the eater (where the eater may be anything from a blue whale to a decay bacterium). There are, however, some dead remnants that remain intact for thousands of years. There is old wood, charcoal from old campfires, old textiles, remains of old sea-shells, and so on.

In 1946, the American chemist Willard Frank Libby (1908-1980) suggested that carbon-14 be used to date such objects and worked out the necessary techniques. As a result, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1960.

Radiocarbon dating isn't easy. If you take a quantity of present-day wood, you will get only 13 low energy beta particles per minute for every gram of carbon it contains. If it is 5,000 years old, you will get perhaps seven counts per minute. These beta particles have to be detected despite the various radiations in the environment that are *not* produced by carbon-14. This means that the counting device has to be surrounded by elaborate shields.

The accuracy of the technique can be determined by working out the age of wood from old Egyptian tombs and comparing it with the age as determined from historical evidence. The result isn't bad, though radiocarbon dating doesn't pin things down as precisely as the historic evidence seems to.

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You might think that if ordinary historical reasoning is more precise than radiocarbon dating, we have no need for the latter — but Egyptian relics take us back only 5,000 years. Before that, there stretches a period of prehistory for which ordinary dating is very vague indeed, but for which radiocarbon dating remains reasonably accurate. Radiocarbon dating can, indeed, work for objects up to 70,000 years old.

Radiocarbon dating has been used to give us an idea of when human beings first entered the Americas, for instance, and when the most recent retreat of the glaciers took place. As a matter of fact, it had been reasoned out that the last retreat of the glaciers took place perhaps 25,000 years ago, but radiocarbon data of ancient samples of wood tells us this happened only 10,000 years ago.

Can we be sure that radiocarbon dating is accurate, however? Are there any sources of error?

Assuming that the decay rate of carbon-14 is constant over the eons (as physicists are confident it is) then one source of error is fractionation. Carbon-14 is about 4.5 percent more massive than carbon-12, and while the former undergoes the same chemical reactions as carbon-12 does, it does so a bit more sluggishly. That means that if you start off with a quantity of carbon and allow half of it to react in a certain way, the portion that has reacted is richer in carbon-12 and poorer in carbon-14 than the portion that has not reacted. Such fractionation effects must be taken into account — and are.

A more troubling kind of error involves the formation of carbon-14 to begin with. After all, how can we assume that the incidence of cosmic-ray particles has always been constant? Might not the number of particles striking the atmosphere vary over the years?

Periodically, a supernova may explode within a few hundred light-years of Earth. Wouldn't that mean that there would be a temporary wash of additional cosmic ray particles over the Earth?

Then, too, variations in the intensity of Earth's magnetic field would result in cosmic ray particles being warded off with varying efficiency, and we know that the magnetic intensity *does* vary considerably over the years.

Some idea of the variations in cosmic ray intensity and the rate of formation of carbon-14 can be obtained by studying the carbon-14 content of various rings in old wood, and this helps us to make allowance for such variation.

But cosmic events like supernovas and planetary magnetic field vari-

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ations are not all that introduce uncertainties. Believe it or not, human activity now does the same. For a couple of decades after World War II there was atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs, and, as a result, large numbers of neutrons were released into the atmosphere. This resulted in the formation of enough carbon-14 to raise the total quantity significantly. — And thereby hangs a tale.

Suppose we ask ourselves to what extent the human body is affected by radioactivity in the natural environment. There are small quantities of uranium and thorium in the rocks and soil that surround us, in the bricks and stones of which houses are built, and so on. In fact, uranium and thorium, breaking down, produce infra-tiny quantities of a radioactive gas, radon, and these days people are worried about the accumulation of radon in the air inside houses. This is particularly so, now that we're so busy insulating in order to conserve heat that we are also cutting down on ventilation, so that less of the radon is swept out of the interior of living quarters and into the atmosphere outside.

In addition, there is the unending pitter-patter of cosmic ray particles and the secondary radiations they produce, which penetrate our bodies constantly throughout life.

All this energetic radiation can disrupt molecules within our bodies, occasionally producing mutations which can show themselves up most drastically in the form of occasional development of cancer and birth defects.

However, humanity (and all life) has been subject to this sort of thing throughout its history, and the destructive effects of such external radiation is less than the constructive effects — since a certain level of mutation is necessary if evolution is to take place at some reasonable rate. Without the radiation that can occasionally produce a fatal cancer or birth defect, we wouldn't be here at all — so the price must be paid.

Besides, external radiation is not as bad as it sounds. As it penetrates and passes through our bodies, the chances are very much against such radiation striking any molecule whose disruption will cause a mutation. Most of the time — by far, most of the time — such radiation expends itself on water molecules and on other relatively insensitive constituents of the body.

But not all radiation is external. The body is itself radioactive. There is an enemy within!

The body is composed of various elements, and some of them have

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naturally occurring radioisotopes. One of the elements is potassium, an absolutely essential component of the body. In nature (and in our bodies) there are three potassium isotopes: potassium-39, potassium-40, and potassium-41. Of these, potassium 40 is the rarest. Only one potassium atom out of 8400 is potassium-40. This potassium-40, however, is very slightly radioactive. It has a half life of 1.3 billion years and is therefore constantly producing beta particles.

The human body is about 0.01 potassium. A 70-kilogram (154-pound) adult would therefore contain 700 grams (24.7 ounces) of potassium. This means it contains 83 milligrams (3/1000 of an ounce) of potassium-40. We can figure out how many atoms of potassium-40 are present in 83 milligrams, and from the half-life, we can figure out how many of these atoms are breaking down and releasing beta particles each second. The answer is 1900.

These beta particles disrupt atoms and molecules and do damage. However, there are fifty trillion cells in the body, and, on the average, any one cell is exposed to the effect of only one potassium-40 beta-particle per year. And, again, this beta particle usually expends its energy in harmless ways.

It has been calculated, in fact, that potassium-40 radiation subjects the body to radiation of about the same order of magnitude that cosmic rays subject it to. Since we can live with cosmic rays, we can also live with potassium-40.

No other element essential to the body's functions has a natural long-lived radioactive isotope. Two of the elements, however, have a short-lived radioactive isotope that wouldn't exist but for the fact that it is constantly being manufactured by cosmic rays. One of them is carbon-14, of course, and the other is hydrogen-3 (tritium).

In 1946, Libby showed that cosmic rays form hydrogen-3, which is thus found in nature in small quantities. Hydrogen-3 has a half-life of 12.26 years, which is only 1/460th that of carbon-14. It vanishes correspondingly more quickly so that the concentration in the atmosphere (and therefore in plants, and therefore in us) is much lower than is the case with carbon-14.

In naturally-occurring hydrogen, only one atom out of a billion billion is hydrogen-3. The human body is about 0.12 hydrogen, but this includes only 8.4 quadrillionths of a gram of hydrogen-3, a vanishingly small quantity. Hydrogen-3 gives rise to only three disintegrations per second in the body as a whole. This can be dismissed as completely insignificant.

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That leaves us with carbon-14. The human body is 0.15 carbon, so a 70-kilogram person contains 10.5 kilograms of carbon. Since there is one carbon-14 in every 540 billion carbon atoms, the body contains 190 millionths of a gram of carbon-14. Given the half-life of carbon-14, we can calculate that the number of beta particles produced by carbon-14 in one second is about 3,100.

This means that the total number of beta particles produced in a 70-kilogram human body is about 22,100 per second. Of these, 86 percent is produced by potassium-40, 14 percent by carbon-14 and 0.00014 by hydrogen-3.

Since I reasoned that the potassium-40 in the body is not present in great enough quantity to be considered any more dangerous than cosmic ray bombardment, it might seem we could certainly dismiss carbon-14 and hydrogen-3 and drop the whole subject.

But wait! Let's start all over again.

The various parts of the body are not all to be considered equally vital. We know this. A bullet in the shouder or the foot is no pleasure, but it probably won't kill you. A bullet in the brain or heart, however, will finish you at once.

In the same way, an energetic particle streaking through a cell may hit a number of water molecules, or fat molecules, or starch molecules and won't do any irreparable damage. That same particle hitting a DNA molecule can do much damage, for the DNA molecule controls some vital portion of the cell machinery and damage done to it can produce a mutation that *may* bring about cancer or birth defects.

However, the mass of the DNA molecules in the cells is about 1/400 of that of the entire cell, so that particles streaking through the cell in random directions will not often strike a DNA molecule and will expend their energies (as a bullet in the shoulder will) on relatively unimportant changes. This is true, even if the particle is produced by some breakdown within the body.

In other words, most radiation originating within the body is not very different in its effect from radiation outside the body. It is only if the radioactive atom happens to be actually located with the DNA molecule itself that we have a true case of the enemy within.

From that standpoint, potassium-40 is eliminated. There are no potassium atoms in the DNA molecule. There are, however, carbon and hydrogen atoms present, so there must also be present, to some small

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extent, carbon-14 and hydrogen-3.

Of these, two, the hydrogen-3 atom produces only one-thousandth as many breakdowns as the considerably more common carbon-14 atom, so let's eliminate hydrogen-3 as probably insignificant and concentrate on carbon-14.

Every time a carbon-14 atom breaks down, it becomes a nitrogen-14 atom. This change of carbon to nitrogen changes the chemical nature of the DNA molecule and this, in itself, produces a mutation, though how dangerous a mutation, it is hard to say. However, when the carbon-14 atom shoots out a beta particle, the chemical change may be the least of it. There is a recoil which may force the exploding carbon-14 to break the bonds that hold it to its neighbors. In other words, the DNA molecule will break in two, and this makes for a possibly drastic kind of mutation.

Suppose we calculate how many carbon atoms there are in the DNA molecules of a cell and then how many of these are carbon-14. I've done this in a sort of back-of-the-envelope way, and it seems to me that there is one atom of carbon-14 for every twenty cells, and one breakdown per year for every 24,000 cells.

That doesn't sound like much, but, again, there are about 50 trillion cells in the body, so that we end by having about six breakdowns of carbon-14 in all the various DNA molecules of a 70-kilogram body *every second*.

What's six breakdowns per second? Virtually nothing, you might suppose, and if they were ordinary breakdowns with particles speeding through the cell at random, you would be right. In this case, however, *every single one of the breakdowns produces a mutation in the very moment of breakdown.*

It is possible, of course, that most of these mutations are relatively harmless. It is also possible that some severe mutations may kill a cell which may then be easily replaced.

However, some cells killed in this way (notably nerve cells and brain cells) may not be capable of replacement. Also some mutations may not kill a cell but may make that cell a cancerous one. It might be argued that the important mutations found in all organisms result principally (though, of course, not entirely) from the carbon-14 atoms present in DNA molecules, and that the effect of cosmic rays, for instance, rest indirectly upon the carbon-14 atoms they form.

I first pointed out the danger of carbon-14 in DNA molecules in a

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short article entitled "The Radioactivity of the Human Body" in the February, 1955 issue of the Journal of Chemical Education. (Yes, for a few years in the early 1950's I wrote articles for learned journals. This one, as it happens, was the last.)

I believe I may have been the first, or very nearly the first, to do so. Willard Libby may have beaten me to the punch by a few months, but I'm not sure of that. In any case, I wasn't aware of his work when I wrote my article.

The last paragraph of my paper went as follows: "In the light of this, it would be interesting to note whether a diet high in carbon-14 would increase the mutation rate in an animal such as *Drosophila,* or the rate of tumor formation in cancer-prone strains of mice, and whether any correlation existed between the increase (if any) in mutagenesis or carcinogenesis, and the increase (if any) of carbon-14 in the genes."

I don't know if such experiments were ever carried out. Certainly, I didn't have either the training or the equipment to carry them out myself. I also didn't know at the time I wrote the article that the atmospheric testing of nuclear bombs was producing a significant increase in the atmospheric content of carbon-14.

Linus Pauling, however, knew of the increase, and, some time later, he saw its significance (and I can only hope that my article in the Journal of Chemical Education — a journal he later told me he read regularly — contributed to the realization). He promptly began a campaign to convince world leaders and the public that every nuclear explosion in the atmosphere increased the incidence of cancer of various sorts and of birth defects because of the increase of carbon-14 in the atmosphere, and, therefore, in the genes.

It was his arguments of this sort, more than anything else, that led to the test-ban treaty of 1963 and to the end of atmospheric nuclear explosions.

I'm rather proud of this. My own role was microscopic and I give all credit to Professor Pauling, but of all the good scientific ideas I have had in my lifetime, and I have had a few, I think this one was the best.

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There is an interesting and distinguished body of SF stories about the game of chess, and to this must be added Ian Watson's "Queenmagic, Pawnmagic." The tale is narrated by the pawn-squire named Pedino, and it concerns the compelling and magical struggle between his city of Bellogard and the ebon city of Chorny.

Queenmagic, Pawnmagic

BY
IAN WATSON

What you see on the board is only the outcrop of a much larger world, like mountain peaks above mist.
— Bishop Lovats the Perceptive

Do you spy the palace of Queen Isgalt?

Magnificent, eh? Yet what a medley! Part fortress, part fantasia.

Hewn into the curtain walls were mullioned windows of stained glass; invaders could practically leapfrog their way in. Isgalt's predecessor, Queen Alyitsa, had those windows sawed through the stone — to let in light, she said, for light is the foe of dark and night. Alabaster statues of soldiers (from Queen Dama's reign, before) stood on the palace parapets: a perch for pigeons. The white onion domes were so pierced by quatrefoils that they resembled peasants' lacework — or curious colanders for draining salads. Rain poured through them to spout out by way of demon gargoyles. The impression was of roofs that moths had feasted on.

As for the cupolas topping the towers, on festival nights, bright blaziers were lit in those. Often updrafts swirled sparks aloft so that the royal flags caught alight, burning high in the night and skidding down the spires to the roofs below like bloody, tattered shirts.

But of course, no common or garden siege would decide the outcome of the war . . .

Our lovely, wistful Queen Isgalt possessed only half the magic force of Queen Alyitsa, a quarter of the power of Queen Dama. King Karol spent much of his time high in the central tower devoting himself to

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bubble-art. Prince Ruk, who guarded the king, could race along two lines of magic. But the prince had long since used up his ability to shift instantaneously to another place through the body of a pawn-squire. (He used it to rescue King Karol from the suicidal attack of the Knight of Night, Oscaro.) Bishop Veck, who practiced crosswise magic, continued to minister to the queen and to brace her courage. As did chevalier Sir Brant, who jumped askew through magics. Our city of Bellogard had survived longer than some of us imagined it might.

And I?

My name is Pedino. I was a pawn-squire.

At times how I envied the ordinary lives of burghers and menials of Bellogard, of farmers and peasants throughout the Dolina Valley and the rest of the kingdom; even though those people had no full souls that might migrate to another life when our kingdom finally fell, when all houses and barns tumbled into chaos, and the palace burned like white paper.

How proud I was, as a lad, to have my soul divined as a full soul by the late Bishop Slon. How can I forget that day?

Queen Alyitsa was still with us. Isgalt was only one of a quartet of princesses. Despite the loss of Queen Dama, the struggle against the ebon city of Chorny seemed remote, inconsequential to our lives; not so much a total war to the death, by magic, as a mischievous dispute, a cantankerous scrimmage. There had been sorrow at the death of the long-reigning queen — she was killed when I was only an infant, and my mother told me about the pang people felt. There had been a whole fortnight of mourning; but no sense of doom. (Ah, but Prince Ruk and Bishop Veck knew the truth. They realized how vulnerable — in the long run — Dama's loss had made us.)

My father was a pipe maker in Chalk Street near the Spomenik Monument, and my mother ran the tobacconist's shop that occupied the front of our premises. My sister Drina, a year older than I, was blonde and slim and tall, though with blobby features that gave her an air of whimsical babyishness; whereas my own hair was dark as walnut, my features were open, and I was broader of build, though always somewhat shorter than Drina. She was a long clay pipe with a little bowl of a head; I was a burlier, briefer briar.

My childhood was interesting and happy. Both parents were at home all of the time, and there were constant visitors to the shop, sometimes quite exalted ones. Shop and workshop provided fascinating hideouts.

In the workshop were tool-strewn benches for cutting, whittling, drilling, and polishing wood, for crafting

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silver lids to cap expensive long pipes; clay molds and an oven: a deep cupboard where chunks of wood matured for up to two years. As kids, we sometimes took clays that had been rejected because of some trivial bobble or air pit, and dipped them in soapy water to try to blow magical bubbles. Naturally we always failed, producing streams of quivering airy spheres that quickly popped.

Dad was purveyor of pipes by appointment to the palace; perhaps we weren't such total commoners. His royal warrant looked grand, carved on the sign that hung outside, but this by no means implied constant consultations with the king. Dad had crafted his most recent bubble-pipe masterpieces for His Majesty in the year of my birth. Equerries occasionally purchased ordinary smoking pipes, and flunkies frequently called to buy Mum's special "royal cut mixture"; but that was a more mundane matter.

Mum's shop! — with its heady, nostril-teasing jars of shag and rum-shag, mellowleaf and ambershred; the plugs and pigtails laid out like knots of rope; the boxes of cheroots; the snuff boxes of all scents from mint to strawberry. Dad's pipes on display: racks and trays of clays and chibouks, briars and lulus. Boxes of lucifers illustrated with views of Bellogard, blooms from the botanic garden, fish of Lake Riboo.

Every year during our childhood, we holidayed in the countryside at the village of Duvana, where the tobacco plantations were. Mum did not personally buy tobacco wholesale, but she liked to keep an eye on the quality of the crop and the standard of curing in the sheds. Duvana was close to the Shooma Forest and uplands; Dad would make excursions with the woodcutters to choose his branches for maturing in the cupboard back home and subsequent carving into pipe bowls and stems. The area around Duvana was a well-known beauty spot dominated by snow-tipped Mount Planina. The Vodopad Waterfall was half a day's journey by horse and trap. Ruined Zamak Castle offered a stiff climb up from the base of the falls. We enjoyed our holidays.

Then there was Bellogard itself to explore: sprawling Piazza Market with its flower and fruit and vegetable stalls; the cool catacomb of the fish market underneath; slippery, smelly stone steps leading down to the fish quay on the river Rehka; and behind Piazza the blood and sawdust arcades of the meat and offal shops. There was smart white Terga Square with its outdoor cafés and cake-icing buildings, the carved stone and plasterwork seeming piped from a master pastrycook's tube — and the astrology observatory on Bresh Hill overlooking the botanic gardens . . .

Drina and I were forbidden to explore the Seveno district with its sprightly, disreputable bar-restau-

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rants, "theaters," casinos, dancing halls, and "houses of ladies." Since Drina usually tagged along with me and since I didn't entirely trust her to keep a secret, on the whole Seveno remained for years as much outside my ken as the queen's own palace. Take Drina through Seveno, even by day? She might be dragged inside one of those "houses of ladies" by a burly doorman for some unknown but embarrassing purpose.

A couple of incidents stand out from my boyhood, the second one marking its end.

The first event was an outing by my Gymnasium class to the Samostan, Bishop Slon's town residence, with its wonderful topiary gardens where peacocks shrieked and stamped in circles, flaunting their blazoned tails, quills rattling like sticks on railings. Bishop Slon was chairman of governors of the Gymnasium.

All of us had visited the Samostan gardens numerous times; yes, and chased the big, stupid, glorious birds hoping to snatch a plume unobserved. On this occasion we were special guests of the bishop, who had arranged for a picnic of stuffed pancakes and lemonade on the main lawn.

There we all were, guzzling away on a bright, breezy afternoon under the benevolent gaze of the bishop. Swathed in white dalmatic and tunicle, with pearl-trimmed buckled shoes on his white-socked feet and a white biretta on his head, he sat enthroned in a high-back wicker chair with parasol attached. Our austere, dun-suited teacher, Master Samo, was chatting to him deferentially. Head-bobbing peacocks and hens pecked at crumbs that we flicked their way.

Slon was a tubby fellow. His cheeks were ripe apples, almost tomatoes. However, his hands were big and bony. I remember noticing his hands because he began crackling his finger joints, producing crunchy little explosions that reminded me of a hound chewing over a marrowbone, or far-off crepitations of thunder.

Presently Slon's gaze unfocused, so that it seemed as if Master Samo was boring him considerably.

In view of what was to happen, might it have been more sensible and considerate if Slon had fled, skirts flapping, inside the residence while he still had time? Vulnerable children sat all around him.

Yet what were the lives of a score of striplings — most of whom might have only the hundredth part of a soul — if protecting them from harm distracted the bishop's concentration from a far more important task?

And perhaps he did shield us.

Abruptly, to everyone's astonishment, Slon leapt up, knocking his wicker throne over. He adopted the stance of someone holding a quarterstaff — or invisible crosier — with which to do combat. He stared up. So did we.

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Amidst otherwise scudding billows of clean, woolly cumulus, one tiny compact black cloud moved at an eerily slower pace. This cloud didn't obey the wind at all. It swung gently from side to side like the bob of a pendulum, always coming closer. Soon it was overhead. Its shadow fell upon the lawn, drinking the sunlight. Momentarily the cloud seemed to be flying up and away, shrinking as it receded. But no. It was descending, compacting, growing denser as it sank.

Slon skipped diagonally through our midst, scattering boys like pins. He danced diagonally a different way, kicking a peacock. Sweat-dew flew from his cheeks. He shouted words that I didn't understand but some of which — alas — I memorized.

"Opasnost po Zhivot!"

Lightning flashed from the coaly cloud, which was only just overhead. Slon swung his pretend crosier this way, that way, as the dazzling blue bolt struck. Electric fire shattered and flew aslant across the lawn.

When my vision blinked clear, I saw Slon still standing erect. The stuff of the black cloud — no longer above us — had gathered tarrily on his hand. He jerked the evil material to the ground, where it bubblingly evaporated. Kneeling, he furiously wiped his skin clean on the grass, which withered into brown threads.

Peacocks were rushing around, tails erect, clattering with color. Peacocks have such tiny heads that it took me several moments to realize that all the birds had been decapitated — their heads sliced off by the lightning.

The headless birds paraded madly for a couple more minutes, displaying passionately — thin pulses of blood squirting from their severed necks as they cavorted. Their claws raked the hands and cheeks of sprawled, stunned pupils until one by one the peacocks all fell over and lay still.

The bishop had resumed his previous pose of alertness, though twice he massaged his wrist.

A young man in a sober black suit staggered out from between huge box-bushes clipped to the shape of spinning tops. Bloody saliva dribbled from the stranger's mouth, beneath a trim black mustache. His suit jacket was torn. A limp hand held a dagger loosely.

The young man advanced waveringly. He raised his dagger. In a flurry of white, Slon dashed forward. Hoisting his skirts, he kicked the weapon from the stranger's grasp. The young man moaned, sighed, sank to his knees. Slon placed a pearly shoe against the would-be assassin's shoulder and toppled him on the turf.

By now our whole class was watching, agape. Absurdly, Master Samo was scurrying to pick up all the scattered heads of peacocks and hens. Samo loped to a flower bed and

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pressed his gruesome collection down tidily, beak first, into the soil to hide them. Had it occurred to Samo that he might as easily have been collecting the severed heads of boys for delivery to their parents? Supposing that Slon had parried the lighting *thus,* rather than *that way*?

Slon laughed grimly. "You may plant 'em. Those corms won't grow new birds." He wiped a tear from his eye: or was that a bead of sweat?

Scrawny, respectable Master Samo shook his head in confusion. He blushed as if caught in some childish prank or act of lubricity. His body had been doing things of which he was hardly conscious. His undermind had been operating him.

The black-clad stranger lay twitching. Perhaps near death, perhaps already dead, his weak spasms those of a dissociating soul.

Samo jerked a questioning finger at the body, gestured at his flock of boys. How much was it advisable to say? Would the bishop be so kind?

Obliging, Slon spread his arms. "Beloved boys! Behold here a man from Chorny. A magical pawn. What do we have to fear from such feeble bumblers?" He scooped up the dagger and cautiously sniffed the point. "Well, even a bumbler has a sting! I detect poison as well as magic. Which is why I used my shoe to disarm him. Do not fret about this disruption that mars your picnic. But do not neglect to reflect in one corner of your mind upon the basis of reality, namely the magical enmity that dark Chorny holds for our beautiful Bellogard."

"Boys, be watchful," Samo instructed. "Ever watchful."

The bishop frowned. "No, that would be paranoid, and would spoil our town. I've no doubt that in Chorny, everyone watches everyone else. They must, there where blackness reigns! Ours is a land of light and openness and pleasure. Let us fear no evil."

He rubbed the hand that had been soiled by black ooze, and smiled approvingly. With a mischievous grin at us boys, he stuck two fingers in his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle.

Flunkies came running.

"*Remove* this creature. Convey him speedily to the queen's dungeons. Summon chirurgeons to inspect him. Farewell, and bless you, boys."

Obviously we gossiped amongst ourselves, and at home, about the incident. My classmate Alexander Mog (whose death I shall come to shortly) claimed that when Slon spoke of summoning chirurgeons, he really meant torturers. Given the assailant's moribund condition, this seemed unlikely, a product of Mog's unwholesome imagination.

A. Mog's mind wasn't entirely healthy. He was handsome and tall for his age, but he was also a bully with a cruel, nasty streak. He bred rabbits, confining them in tiny hutches. He liked to pick them up

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painfully by their long ears to show how they should be killed, by a chop on the neck. He especially enjoyed demonstrating this skill to girls, and pressured any classmate with a pretty sister to bring her round to his home to visit. He boasted how he would hypnotize a girl, like a weasel fixing a bunny, then he could leap on her and bite her neck with kisses and play with her indecently. The rabbit that he killed before her eyes would do the trick. A girl's slight, shy, yielding soul was like the soul of a rabbit. (Irrespective of the virtual certainty that A. Mog himself would have only a partial, microscopic soul!) Within six months of the magical assassination attempt, A. Mog was leaning on me to persuade me to bring Drina his way; for what I perceived as a babyface perched upon a willowy frame, he viewed as someone vulnerably desirable.

But I anticipate.

To infill for a moment, we all talked about the magical skirmish, speculating in particular about the workings of the lightning that lopped off the heads of the bishop's prized peacocks (a feature of the incident that strongly appealed to A. Mog!). I kept quiet regarding the exact words that Slon had shouted, which I alone appeared to remember. (I was specially receptive to the magic language, but I didn't know that at the time.)

The official paper, *Noveeny,* carried a statement from the palace dismissing the attack as a trivial impertinence; and my parents and neighbors soon lost interest. Nothing was said about the fate of the attacker. Maybe he was already in Grobbny Cemetery or buried in a lime pit inside the palace grounds. The life of Bellogard, and my own boyhood, flowed on. The event seemed of no more ultimate account than a stone tossed into the Rehka. It made a splash, then sank out of sight.

Now we shift forward almost a year. It had been a cold winter, with much fluffy snow to toboggan on, long icicles spearing down from gutters, and small floes speeding along a swollen Rehka like families of dingy ducks.

The spring arrived, hot and sudden. All over town, Jew's mallows, quinces, and magnolia trees burst into bloom: golden pompons, waxy cups of blood, milky goblets. A. Mog had begun browbeating me the previous autumn, but winter cooled his ardor. A few idle threats to whip up a gang to bind me with rope on the way home and plaster me up as a snowman amounted to nothing.

Come spring, with its sudden heat and restlessness, its frustrated excitement and sweet fragrance in the air, and the doffing of heavy clothing, he resumed the onslaught. I must bring Drina to visit his rabbits — who were mating vigorously till the bucks lay

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flopped out, heaving and panting — or he would punish me.

Coincidentally — if it *was* a coincidence — A. Mog's more amiable crony Boris Slad proposed a swimming expedition. Boris's sister Dana attended the same academy as Drina. A dozen of us, plus any sisters, should visit the thermal baths.

These baths were at the south end of town beneath the looming Razval Rock, which housed picturesque ruins of an ancient fortress, or perhaps a folly, the origin of which was something of a mystery. A fortress situated on that eminence would splendidly command the river; yet who would ever attack upstream? Anyway, an attack was a magical affair, not a jaunt by boat or barge.

Hot mineral water bubbled up from the deep guts of the rock. The outer, marble bath was a cold one fed by river water. The inner bath-carved into the limestone itself, though open to the elements — was hot, steamy, and sulfurous. Breezes ventilated the excess of rotten-egg vapor.

During the winter the baths were used only by the sort of stern old men who believe that an extreme contrast of hot and cold on their bare bodies —a simmering by mineral soup interspersed with icy plunges and soft flagellation by snowflakes — is salubrious.

Come the spring, the baths became much more popular as a way of steaming the winter out of one's pores; not to mention accumulated dirt, if one was poor and had no home plumbing. Later, summer's heat would render the inner bath intolerable; attendance would fall off; those spartan curmudgeons would come back into their own.

Boris declared as an added inducement that we were all invited to call at A. Mog's afterward for a wine and soda and a homemade rabbit pastry, since swimming always leaves such an enervating hole in the belly. Alexander Mog leered at me.

"Come on now!" Boris insisted. "An opportunity not to missed. Everyone must turn up without fail. Anyone who lets us down is a fishhead. He'll be forced to eat a dozen fishheads cooked in piss."

Personally, the prospect of the outing worried me sick. It even worried me into a dream that night. Otherwise I doubt I would ever have stolen — or borrowed — Dad's perfect pipe. Otherwise A. Mog wouldn't have drowned.

I dreamt of A. Mog slicing heads off rabbits with single lightning chops of his hand, then using their long ears to tickle my sister's long legs, higher and higher, while she stood paralyzed, giggling feebly.

A big buck bunny arrived. Standing up on its hind thumpers, it blew bubbles from a long clay pipe held in its little front legs. The animal could easily blow bubbles because a rab-

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bit's mouth is only a tiny opening like a fish's mouth; and fish blow bubbles in water. (Watch a rabbit when it yawns.)

One huge bubble flew at A. Mog's head and enclosed it without popping. Inside the bubble, Alexander Mog soon began to gasp for air and his face turned blue. My sister ran away, and I woke up.

The pipe that the bunny blew in the dream was the very same clay that my dad had made a few weeks earlier, which he had pronounced to be an impeccable pipe. It was the very ideal of a Dutch-style clay as regards the curve of the stem, the oval of the bowl, the little nub on the underside —the acme of master craftsmanship.

"King Karol ought to blow this one himself," Dad said. "Except, I doubt if a king would ever blow a mere clay."

He placed it inside a glass case in the shop, instructing Mum never to sell it, though to her eyes the perfect pipe looked much like any other clay specimen.

The visit to the Razval baths had been set for a Sunday afternoon. Before Drina and I set out (both wearing our costumes under our clothes so that we wouldn't have to get changed anywhere near A. Mog), I sneaked into the closed shop, opened the case, and slipped the perfect pipe inside my towel — along with a little bottle of liquid soap.

Our route to the baths took us by way of the wooded Vertovy Gardens, overlooked by white stucco walls and steep red dormer-studded roofs of prosperous burgher houses, one of these being the Slad residence. Slad Senior was a banker.

We had set out earlier than need be, so I suggested that we ring the bell of the Slad door. Boris and Dana were still at home; soon they were accompanying us.

I felt as much as ease with Dana as did Drina. whilst Boris was cordial when not in bad company. I opened my towel to show them what lay inside.

"My father made a magic pipe for the king," I said. "A fortune pipe."

"But Ped," protested my sister.

I hushed her. "Listen here, Boris and Dana. I intend to blow a fortune for Alexander Mog. By way of a jape! We'll pull him down a gentle peg or two. Without imperiling our pasties, of course."

"You?" scoffed Boris. "Blow a magic bubble?"

I winked. "If my bubble shows nothing and bursts right away, will you two swear that you saw something absolutely *awful* in it?"

"Such as what?" asked Dana gleefully.

"So dreadful that you can't tell. Keep him guessing."

"No fear! He'll duck me. He'll twist my arm."

"I'd stop him." declared Dana's brother.

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"There'd be a fight."

"Hmm," said Boris.

"Let's pretend," I said, "that the ghastly thing you saw was Mog's nose starting to twitch, and his ears suddenly growing long and hairy — and him becoming a big black rabbit. All because of some magical attack from Chorny that goes askew. Let's hold off from telling him for as long as possible; preferably till we get back to his house and have our pasties. But beforehand we'll spread the word to everyone we trust. When you do finally tell him, everyone who's in the know can stick their fingers up above their ears and hop up and down together and laugh at him."

"He won't like it," said Boris. "He'll be furious."

"He won't *do* anything. Bullies shrink when everyone else gangs up on them. He might even cry."

"And *you'll* be the leader of the class," Dana told her brother, "as you ought to be."

I'd been intending to suggest the very same thing myself.

"Better," she went on, "a banker's son as leader than a butcher's boy—with banker's son dancing attendance all the time." Mog Senior was indeed a butcher; hence his son's habits with rabbits.

"Damned impertinence," muttered Boris. I couldn't be sure whether he was referring to his sister's criticism of him, or to the supremacy of A. Mog. He walked on with us in silence for a while, then suddenly said, "Right! That's what we'll do."

An hour later our whole party was disporting in the hot, effervescent, smelly waters. This great stone inner bath was contoured so that a shallow shelf led to a sloping middle area with a very deep pit of water beyond. The limestone roof was vaulted so that condensation mostly ran down the slope of the vault to slick the walls instead of falling directly in cool, stinging drops upon the pink-flushed bodies below. Too, this deterred stalactites from forming. The walls were embossed with enormous fluted columns, crusted with deposits.

Most of us were capering in the shallows. Our voices clattered back at us from roof and walls like cascades of breaking crockery. Word had been passed surreptitiously. Meanwhile, A. Mog was showing off to Dana Slad, who had volunteered to be his audience. Down at the deep end, he was performing backward flips into the water, scrambling out, and flipping again.

I scampered to the stone bench where I'd left my towel, and returned with pipe and soap bottle.

"Alexander Mog!" I shouted. All my fellow conspirators stood stock-still in the water and chorused his name, then became quiet as mice, watching intently.

From the edge of the deep end, A. Mog glared across the water at me. I

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shouted my lie about the magic pipe. I unstoppered the bottle, poured soap in the hot water, and scooped the pipe through.

"This is your fate!" I cried. For good measure, I shouted those words in the language of magic that I remembered the bishop uttering: "*Opasnost po Zhivot!*" I put the pipe to my lips.

To my surprise, I blew a perfectly enormous, shimmery bubble.

I continued blowing. The bubble did not burst. It swelled and swelled till it was a full meter across.

The bubble detached itself from the bowl. Bobbing on hot air and rising mineral gas, it floated away over the water in the direction of A. Mog. Everyone stared in wonder. The bubble showed no scenes, only an oily sheen, but it was still a marvel.

"*Opasnost po Zhivot!*" I shrieked, intoxicated with myself. The bubble picked up speed.

A. Mog decided that he'd had enough of this; he wasn't going to wait till the bubble popped all over him. He cleaved the water in a swan dive.

The giant bubble also dived. When it touched the water, it spread out; became an iridescent, frail dome. Swiftly the dome shrank and vanished.

A. Mog failed to surface.

"Look!" Dana was pointing down into the deep water.

I padded hastily around the side of the pool. Classmates were hauling themselves out and rushing along to join Dana.

A. Mog was balled up tight against the bottom. His knees were drawn up to his chest, his head was bowed over. His palms were pushing, and his knees were jerking as he tried to kick. He looked like an engraving I'd seen of a fetus in the womb.

His womb was a sphere of water, a sphere that stayed heavily in the depths irrespective of his struggles. He couldn't break free, no matter how hard he thrust. The bubble had sunk down, enclosed him, and become that death trap.

A crowd of us gazed in horror, yet no one volunteered to jump in. A. Mog's submerged flailing reached a climax of desperation, then ceased. he hung motionless, a big, limp fetus in a blue-striped bathing costume. My classmates turned to stare at me as I stood there with the perfect pipe in my hand.

"I'll fetch him out," I said. "I'll try to revive him." Obviously he was stone-dead by now. I passed the pipe to Drina for safekeeping.

I made four exhausting trips down into the pit. The depth was too great for me to grab the equivalent of a sack of potatoes, get my feet on the bottom, and kick our combined weights back up. Water blurred my vision, though since I could feel Mog's limbs, I knew the magic bubble was gone — now that he was a corpse.

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Eventually the bath attendant brought a rope and tied a noose with slipknot. Boris dived and secured one of A. Mog's wrists. Thus the bully, dead by magic, was pulled back up to the surface and heaved out onto the stone surround.

I heard Dana say to Boris, "Wonder what'll become of our rabbit pasties now?"

A. Mog lay in the soil of Grobbny Cemetery. The affair stirred a deal of gossip, and a somewhat inaccurate paragraph appeared in *Noveeny*, but now that the threat of Mog was gone, no classmates rallied to praise the dead bully: nor did his family receive more than two-faced sympathy. On the contrary, people began grumbling about the amount of fat and even bone that Mog Senior had ground in with their mince on a certain occasion, or how, another time, some belly of pork was folded around thick suet. I seemed unlikely to be accused of magical murder by Mog the butcher; such an accusation would stick only if popular feeling could be roused.

As to Dad, he was angry at my deceit; but he also cried, "I knew it! I knew it!" and put the impeccable pipe back in the same glass case, to which he now added a lock. He bolted the case to a wall in the shop and hung underneath a nearly lettered sign: *The Perfect Pipe*. Business blossomed better than ever. People from over the river deserted their regular purveyors of baccy to visit our shop and gaze at the white clay pipe that had killed.

Two days subsequent to the drowning, Master Samo had a word with me after class.

"This, er, tragedy, Pedino." Tucking his dominie's gown around his dull brown suit, Samo perched on the edge of his long oak desk. Everyone else had departed.

"Sir?"

"Obviously it was not your fault." (Obviously?) "However, a teacher is occasionally a butt for practical jokes, Pedino, such as a pin on his chair or a book balanced on top of a door. Other boys might, hmm, egg such a joker on."

Samo wasn't meeting my eyes. Was he scared? He was looking beyond me at the rows of scholars' desks, stained with ink, carved as if beetles had bored them.

On the rear wall hung a framed painting of King Karol and Queen Alyitsa. Both were heroically dressed in amberglass armor, though the queen's long legs — also of golden hue — were bare to the thigh, so that we boys had best have our backs to her while we labored at our lessons. Both monarchs were crowned with jagged forks of lightning as though their hair were standing on end, having been washed and dried by a maniac. Under Alyitsa's foot a slaughtered raven held a scroll in its beak

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lettered thus: *The Curse of Chorny.*

Next to the portrait hung a map of the kingdom, from the rocky goat pastures of Zima in the north to the southern vineyards of Letto, from eastern Istok province to westerly Zapad — with Bellogard at the heart. Crowded along the bottom were those border marshes where our kingdom melted into Chorny.

"In the past," observed Samo, "you've brought snuff into school. I've smelled it. I've turned a blind eye."

And one good turn deserves another.

"Honestly, Dominie, I wouldn't dream of bringing a *pipe* into school."

"Good, hmm, good. Glad to hear it. But a pipe is just a tool, don't you know? — the same as a pen is. What it does depends on the person. If the person can't write, then a pen can't help. If he can write, he can write equally powerful words with his finger dipped in soot. If he has the capacity. So: be watchful — of yourself. Will you?"

I promised Master Samo that I would keep my mind in chains.

"Though it's hard," I added, "with Her Majesty on the wall."

"Our queen has magic," he cautioned. "She may know when anyone is concentrating on her."

"In that case she must be blushing all the time. She ought to commission uglier portraits, don't you think, Dominie?"

He sighed. "Ah, Pedino, such pubertal bravado. Yet you are privately rather relieved that the killer of rabbits can no longer pester one's own princess, eh?"

I gaped. "How did you know—?"

He tapped his nose. "I'm not such an imperceptive fogey, such a prematurely dry old stick."

(Indeed not! A couple of years later, when I grew familiar with Seveno district, I was to run into Master Samo under quite other circumstances.)

"At some time in our lives," he continued, "we all experience magic moments. To some degree or another. To the extent that we each possess a little piece of soul! Usually those are *only* moments. A shaft of magic, to us — a mere triviality to a lord or lady of the land from whom true magic flows. I suppose a mighty magic may shaft its way through a commoner due to a chance concatenation of circumstances. So, Pedino, don't be disappointed if it all amounts to nothing; if you spend the rest of your life selling snuff boxes. I'm sure that will be a happier life, while it lasts! There are many ways to amuse oneself in Bellogard. Now, be off with you."

"Thank you, Dominie. Thanks for speaking to me like this."

"A man, to a man." He smiled wryly; and I did not understand the depth of his sadness, but I left the classroom admiring him.

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Bishop Slon sighted along the stem of the perfect pipe, unlocked from its case specially for him. It was a week later. He had arrived just as the shop was closing.

"An arc of a hyperbola," he commented.

Dad nodded, gratified.

"And the bowl, a fractional ellipsoid with exactly 7/22 of it absent, I'll be bound. This truly is an *excellent* pipe — a wonderful happenstance where tacky, finickity, cheap, common clay is involved. Or," he conceded grandly, "a master creation combining eye, hand, alchemistry of the chosen matter, temperature, time, and temperament."

"More likely that," agreed my mother.

"Much more likely. May I purchase this pipe for my collection, sir?"

Dad hesitated. A conflict of urges characteristically made him suck in his cheeks and pop his pursed lips with the sound of a dripping tap.

"Thus we'll keep it out of harm's way, eh?" added Slon.

The interval between drips lengthened as Dad arrived at a decision. "Let it be a gift, my lord Bishop."

"Oh no! Very generous; but no. My sense of obligation might interfere with divination."

"Divination?" Mum queried quickly.

"Of your son, madam. Do set a price, sir."

The tap started dripping again. This time it didn't stop.

"I see your problem, sir. You value this pipe highly, yet to price it at that value might seem excessive. Shall we say twenty crowns?" Dad had stopped drip-popping. Slon fished inside his dalmatic, found a purse, and pressed silver coins on my delighted mother. "Will you wrap the pipe carefully, madam, so that I shan't crack it?"

Slon produced a little bundle of his own and unwrapped a magnificent antique briar. "And if you could bring a bowl of soapy water?"

This was soon done.

The bishop whisked the water with his fingers. "If you will kindly look into the bowl, Pedino? Select a bubble; concentrate." Slon spoke a spell in the magic tongue. He dipped the briar in the bubbly water — "Watch the pipe bowl now" — raised it to his lips, and blew.

A bubble swelled to the size of a basketball. Jerking his head away, he barked a magic command. "Now Pedino, lift the bubble gently with both hands."

The bubble was firm to my touch, and heavy — it might have been thin glass.

A shape appeared within: my image, dressed in a smart white uniform with brass buttons. I sported a little mustache. I looked older. In my right hand I held a poniard slackly; some blue lightning flickered at its tip.

"This is you, as you will be," said the bishop. I declare that you possess

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a full soul, Pedino!"

"A full soul," my mum echoed. "Oh my." (I shall come to the matter of souls, and their sizes, soon.)

"I invite you to train as a pawn-squire at the palace."

"A royal page," said my father. "That's an honor, lad."

"No, said Slon, "it's a *consequence.* the boy has little choice in the matter. Untrained, yet possessing a full magical soul, he would be bound to come to the notice of Chorny eventually; even if he spent his whole life hiding down a drain." (This wasn't quite true, but no matter.) "He might be attacked, or possessed."

"I could cry *Opasnost!*"

"Boy, *boy!*" The bishop chuckled. "No sooner do I say you have a soul, than you are the equal of Sir Brant or Prince Ruk! You must be trained. Now drop that bubble."

I obeyed. The bubble promptly fell to the waxed oak floorboards and shattered, like the skin of ice on a puddle on a wintry morning under a schoolboy's boot. The glassy shards melted till there was only a patch of moisture, drying.

"You've ***killed.***" Slon said. "That may be useful. You're one of the guardians of Bellogard now, Pedino."

And so my true education began.

I soon took up residence in the pages' quarters of the palace, in one of those high towers with a white onion dome atop.

Does this suggest that I was high up the tower? I wasn't. My room looked through mullion windows upon a cobbled courtyard at the rear of the kitchens. Trays of cabbages were my view, sacks of potatoes, churns of milk, crates holding honking geese. The prospect above was of steep towers, and only then the sky.

When I became more proficient, I would earn a room higher up, with an outlook over the town. There was sound sense in my initial immurement down by the kitchens. The bulk of the palace protecting me, while I was still naive.

Now was I housed in a miserable cell. My chamber was spacious, with a grand stone inglenook, the walls were walnut-paneled, and numerous paraffin sconces backed by mirrors lit the room as brightly as desired. I had a big four-poster bed, a carved chest to keep my belongings, a marble washbasin with silver taps, and other creature comforts — not the least a maid, Margarita, to tidy, collect laundry, trim wicks, and such. It was Margarita who soon saw to it that I lost my virginity, in that same four-poster bed. More of this in a moment.

We pages (or pawn-squires) numbered six, of whom I was the last to "make a move on the board," as a palace saying went. (One pawn-squire had been lost due to Prince Ruk's "castling" defense during Oscaro's attack. A second had been "swept off

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the board" when Princess Alyitsa was promoted to queen.)

We were a mixed bunch. King's page, Beno, who took me under his avuncular wing, looked to be in his late fifties, though undoubtedly he was much older. A pawn-squire with full soul could live as long as the kingdom itself without showing undue signs of aging. (Equally, a pawn might at any time be squashed like a fly.)

In descending order of apparent age were: Castle Page Josip, who had lost his own lord when Prince Carl was killed in magic combat — Josip generally attended Prince Ruk, who had been forced to sacrifice his squire. Then: grim Henchy, Bishop Slon's page, who often visited the Samostan. And: Iris, a forceful and handsome woman apparently in her thirties, who was the only female squire. She served Bishop Veck, queen's chaplain. Finally: Knight Page Pyeshka, who squired Sir Brant. Pyeshka was just twenty to look at, jaunty and debonair.

Though nominally a knight page, I had arrived too late to serve slain Sir Vlado; I would be expected to serve the queen herself.

Which brings me to the matter of my sexual initiation in Margarita's arms, and in her loins . . .

I'd been living in the royal household for about three weeks, and so far the transition had passed off painlessly. I knew that I couldn't visit my old home on Chalk Street again until I'd been judged competent — which might take a couple of years. Exposed in town, I might be in peril from any infiltrating Chorny magic. However, I wasn't homesick; I had no fits of the weepies. My fellow squires numbered no A. Mog amongst them. They went out of their way to be accommodating. Even Henchy, who looked so dour, took me on a guided tour of the upper towers. Nobody teased or japed me. I found no dead slugs floating in my soup in the refectory. No one sent me on a mock errand to the dungeons and clanged the door behind my back. Already Beno was my long-lost uncle, and Pyeshka my older brother.

I hadn't yet been presented to Their Majesties, but I'd met Prince Ruk, who would coach me in forward-magic, and Bishop Veck, who would show me the diagonal kind. Pyeshka had spent days leading me around the halls and galleries, courts and gardens and parapets, stables, kitchens, and servants' quarters, then testing me on my newly acquired knowledge. ("What's the fastest route from White Garden to the Buttery, not going by way of the Corridor of Charm?" "Name the route from Topmizzen to Glass Shield hall, via the Beehive Well.") And I had seen princesses at their play.

I'd become reasonably acquainted with the palace in physical terms. I was still a newcomer in other ways, bound to get lost upon that other in-

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visible plan — of relationships, psychology, intrigue.

Intrigue? My fellow squires certainly didn't intrigue against me. Nor did the surviving noble lords plot against one another. They would be stout in each other's defense and in defense of the realm. In furtherance of this, it might become direly necessary for one lord to expose and sacrifice another; but that would not really be intrigue. True, the princesses schemed, whilst conducting their gavottes of amusement and cousinly interplay. They were all rivals to eligibility. Skillful attainments mattered to them as rosettes to a champion horse rider.

The real intrigue to which I refer was the way that the hidden war between Chorny and Bellogard inevitably impinged upon everyday life at the palace. Not upon life in Bellogard, oh no! Far from it. This was a war that immediately menaced and destroyed only those people who were magical. A few soldiers on the southern frontier might be killed in brawls. A village in Letto province might suffer conflagration or pillage. However, it was members of the royal household who would be destroyed by any serious attack, while the ordinary people of the kingdom went about their normal lives. So, yes, the war touched the palace with long fingers. There might be years of peace, but when a move took place, it happened abruptly, sometimes murderously, sometimes inconsequentially. (Or seemingly so. Thus the sense of intrigue at the palace.)

Of course, in the end all would amount to the same thing. If the lords and queen and squires were all destroyed and the king "checkmated," then the kingdom itself would blaze into ashes, fall to pieces, crumble to dust. The hearts of farmers and townsfolk alike would halt, their brains would cease to think. The river Rehka would dry up. The sun would vanish, and the stars. The whole land would be black and empty.

Margarita, additionally, was maid to Iris and Henchy. She was dark and slim, soft-voiced, yet also fierily graceful in a Gypsy kind of way. Her smile was magic (though, strictly speaking, unmagical!); and her dark eyes, too; and her bobbing curly hair. I didn't really know enough to say to myself that she was desirable, though I don't doubt my body told me so. She was taller than I, as of then, though I would outgrow her.

Margarita . . . oh, why should I detail each separate moment of my delicious initiation? Imagine it, rather! Imagine her amiable skill; her tenderness and inflaming caresses; the taste of her tongue, touch of her nipples; the (unmagical) moist magic between her legs, which I soon made so much moister, more than once. I was still a boy, after all; these were naked mysteries. I shall keep them mysterious. Surely it is the aftermath, when

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the seduction was *explained* to me, that is most germane.

I'd wondered initially whether what Margarita and I were up to in a palace bedroom was licit or illicit; soon I'd decided that I didn't care.

Subsequently Margarita lay back yawning. "Boys are so potent at your age! Men go downhill."

"Do you often make love to boys?" I hoped I sounded nonchalant.

"Oh no. Never before. I've heard that said of boys, and it seems true."

I put my hand on her breast. "You wanted to check the truth of it?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"Why, then? Why me?"

"I was asked to, Pedino. Bishop Slon asked me."

"He asked you to take me to bed? Why?"

"He told me to explain, if you asked me." She knit her brow in concentration. "You are to be Queen Alyitsa's squire, aren't you, my vigorous young lover? Well, then, what is your attitude to women? Thus far: idealism!" She sounded as if she was reciting. "You have a sister, whom you idealized; whom you wished to safeguard as a creature without sex. You directed magic violence at another boy who would, in your eyes, violate her blasphemously. The success of your magic reinforces this idealism, carving an emotional channel that in essence denies love and the body. Adolescent frustration would emphasize this pattern — of magic and denial. In your classroom there was a picture of the queen, which you lusted after—"

"So Master Samo has been gossiping!"

She ignored my interruption. The queen would become your new idealized, forbidden elder sister. In your undermind you would resent King Karol for bedding her. This would make you erratic, unreliable. You mustn't protect the queen out of frustration, but out of knowledge. Equally, you might need to defend the king —since the king's survival is crucial. The lava-plug must be drawn from your volcano, so that it gives up its power steadily, flexibly, and consciously — not impetuously and explosively. Therefore I have given you knowledge, of woman's body and your own." She laughed. "Don't look crestfallen. Show me once more what you've learned! If you can!"

Oh, I could.

Next morning I was presented to the king and queen in the Exchequer high up.

Sun streamed through great leaded-light windows. The thick, wide-spaced strips of lead cast a network of shadow bars across a long white marble floor, dividing it into phantom diagonals. In twin ivory thrones sat King Karol and Queen Alyitsa, flanked by muscular soldiers wearing mostly clear glass armor as though each man occupied a contoured,

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transparent box. These guards held spears of glass with crystal tips, another fashion favored by Alyitsa. Flunkies attended behind. Brass-bound doors, wide open, led to a farther, sunlit room: the Chequer Chamber proper.

The king, puffing at a meerschaum pipe, was contemplating a glassy bubble balanced on his knees. He wore a white silk dressing gown, woolly pantofles on his feet, and a golden coronet. King Karol was stout, ruddy, whiskery, and looked to be sixty years old, though I knew he was as old as Bellogard. He was smoking fruity shag rather than the suaver "royal cut mixture."

Queen Alyitsa's long yellow hair tumbled from under a helmet of milky glass. She wore a breastplate of the same material, white leather boots, and a skirt of thonged white leather exposing golden knees and a glimpse of golden thighs. Across her lap she held a sword of glass.

As Beno led me forward, she regarded me intently, though the king continued to admire his bubble. This enclosed a vision of a crazy river looping through space, describing a twisted figure eight so that the surface became the bottom, the bottom the surface. Yachts upon that river became fish; fish changed into yachts.

Beno presented me. I knelt. The guards shuffled, chanking and tinkling, to attention. Alyitsa tapped me on the skull with her sword, then descended from her throne. She raised me by the hand, kissed me briefly on the brow.

"Welcome, Pedino, faithful squire. May your magic multiply and magnify. Will you escort me to the Chequer Chamber? Come, Karol," she called.

Her husband harrumphed, but handed his bubble-prisoned mad river to a flunky and followed us, pantofles sliding over the marble.

In the Chequer Chamber, clear glass windows occupied five out of six walls, affording a fine view of Bellogard and the surrounding countryside. I could make out Lake Riboo in the distance. Within a perimeter of white tiles was an eight-by-eight chequerboard of white marble and black jet slabs, each large enough for a person to stand on with plenty of elbowroom. Queen Alyitsa stepped upon a black slab. She directed me to a white square: the queen's knight's squire position.

"Now," she told me, "you will see some queenmagic."

The king had moved over to one of the windows and was staring out while chatting to Beno, as if reluctant to watch the queen's display or involve himself. His hands described the vista, enfolding, twisting it.

The queen began to sing in the magic language. Ghostly figures appeared on several slabs. The bishops, Slon and Veck. Sir Brant. Prince Ruk. The king himself. My fellow squires. These apparitions seemed as obliv-

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ious as sleepwalkers; perhaps I should say "sleepstanders," since none took as much as a step.

"Stand steady now, Squire." The song quickened and changed key.

Other figures appeared. Of a king—yes, plainly a monarch. He was as portly and antique as our own King Karol, but of cruel countenance and squeezed into a tight black uniform decorated with red sash, red sunbursts.

Of a redheaded queen in long black silken robes, who looked lascivious, sensual. A black-cassocked bishop. A bearded knight in black iron armor. A sly, wiry prince. Two squires in black suits with obsidian buttons.

I glanced at my queen. "Are these actual positions in the war?"

"No. The eidolons show only the number of fighters. Chorny is better positioned."

"They have only two squires. Have all their squires not yet, er, made a move on the board?"

"Chorny is ruthless with its pawnpages. But one is still invisible."

"Is it possible to predict the outcome, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, Probable defeat for Bellogard, unless Chorny blunders. That may be many moves from now. Many, many years."

"Unless a stalemate's reached, where no move ever leads to a result?"

"Move to the square before me, Pedino."

I felt a sense of the bizarre to be moving sideways . . . almost a nausea. The queen beckoned, drew me. I persevered, arrived.

"There'll be no stalemate," she said in my ear.

"Isn't stalemate better than victory by either side? If there's stalemate, life continues. Shouldn't we be trying to force a stalemate? Can't we make a pact with them?"

The queen ruffled my hair. "If only it were so simple. How could we trust them? How could they trust us? Their souls are black, and ours are white. Bishop Veck says we must always aim for victory, even if we vanish as a result. Otherwise, in the next cycle of existence . . ." She fell silent, then resumed. "We must never resign ourselves to defeat; still less adopt the futile impotence of a stalemate policy."

"If only there were some magical means to monitor their actual moves," I said.

"Bellogard has spies. So has Chorny. But spies learn only part of the truth. Spies can be trapped and corrupted."

"There are spies in Bellogard?"

"Oh yes. Spies don't fight. They don't assassinate; though perhaps they may sabotage. And they spy."

"Stalemates might happen by accident? By luck?"

"Unlikely. Human nature finds a position of stalemate hard to tolerate for long."

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"How did we first start losing ground, Majesty?"

"Queen Dama dared a rash move, to try to protect Bellogard totally forever. She had some such idea as yours. So she exposed herself with a squire. She became vulnerable. There's no total defense, no wall of adamantine."

Alyitsa sang again, and the eidolons faded. The chequerboard was soon empty.

"Off to your lessons, my page and pawn!" And the queen smacked me on the rump.

Souls and magic . . .

The war, of course, was waged by means of magical attacks and magical defenses; and magic belonged to people with full souls. However, no one in the kingdom was entirely soulless. Soul diffused outward from the palace and refracted among the whole population. Yet a woodcutter in the Shooma Forest might possess only a hundredth part of a soul (and perhaps the A. Mogs of this world owned only a ten-thousandth!). After death he would be a mere mote in the soul pool, at best a fractional ghost, according to the bishops.

A king had his own characteristic kingmagic. Likewise, a squire possessed pawnmagic. Alyitsa had once been a princess without any magic; now she had half of the magical power of former Queen Dama. When Dama was killed, the princess was promoted through the sacrifice of the previous queen's squire. *His* full soul adhered to Alyitsa, though since his magic was lesser, her new queenmagic was diminished accordingly (while remaining queenly in character).

This I learned from Bishop Veck; I suppose I should present a vignette of one of his tutorials.

Veck was a gaunt, not unkindly man with close-cropped silvery hair, starveling birdlike features, and a perpetual sore on his cheek where he had suffered a magical injury years earlier. He wore a flesh-tinted patch to hide whatever raw deformity lay below. I suspected it pained him to eat, which accounted for his meager diet. Maybe it hurt him to talk, resulting in his usually careful choice of words.

So here I am, meeting this bishop in the palace Bibliotek.

What a strange room that Bibliotek was. I had marveled at the quantity of volumes lining the dusty mahogany shelves. Dusty indeed! No servant was allowed inside with broom or feather duster. Bare floorboards recorded every footprint. Tables and leather chairs were coated. So was the window glass, which looked out upon battlements with some alabaster soldiers on statue-guard.

Veck warned me to step gently so as not to stir up dust unnecessarily; I imagined he would have found sneezing painful.

"What a multitude of books, sir!" I

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recalled the one bookshop in town, which mainly sold school texts and volumes of engravings, one whole section being locked away from young lads and lasses. "I never knew there were so many."

"There aren't," Veck said mysteriously.

"Who wrote them all, sir? Have you read them all?"

"Read?" A laugh, or a cough? Nodding me to join him, he pulled out a leather-bound tome and leafed through. Every page was blank. Yet there was a title tooled on the spine, in the magic language.

"Kneegu," I pronounced.

"It means 'book, Pedino. The title will become more specific once the book starts to fill up." He blew dust from the volume before replacing it. "The dust is words, and words are dust. The dust of time seeds these books and slowly fills them one by one. It records the life of the kingdom: births and deaths, harvests, floods, simple events and strange events. This is a part of magic that I myself still don't properly understand. Everything that has been, is here somewhere. Here is everything —and nothing. All, in its essence, is dust." He gestured. "Do you mark how the books become smaller and smaller toward that farthest, topmost shelf of all? Up there are books so tiny they are indecipherable even with a glass. I believe these contain records of earlier wars. When our present war is finally lost or won, all the big books in this Bibliotek will collapse into one single book the size of a thumbnail, just like one of those."

"Earlier wars, sir? We've never fought anyone else."

"Wars in earlier ages of the world, boy. During previous cycles of existence. Do you imagine this is the first such cycle? Or that it will be the last?"

"If Bellogard and Chorny could reach stalemate—"

"Pah. It's impossible. A vain dream; which will destroy the dreamer."

"What is this room, sir? How did it come to exist?"

"Perhaps it *has* to exist. The whole of the kingdom is reflected here, as surely as souls diffuse outward. I've always been acquainted with it, since the start of existence itself. It does change — despite the dust, or because of the dust. More books fill up slowly. More dust settles out of thin air."

"Can you actually remember the start of existence?" I asked.

"No. When I began to exist, and knew that I existed, my mind already contained memories; just as Bellogard itself has a history of sorts. As witness the Sponenik Monument or the ruins on Razval Rock. You, of course, were born to parents subsequently. All of your memories are genuine."

"Those previous cycles, sir: what do you suppose happened during them?"

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"Why, I think that a white city fought a black city. Sometimes the white palace won, and sometimes the black. Whether those cities were named Bellogard and Chorny, I've no idea."

"Why should they fight over and over again?"

"*They* do not necessarily fight. An ideal fights an ideal, yet each time the embodiment is new. Perhaps. And perhaps one cycle does influence the next."

"But why *fight*?"

"That's how the world is powered, as a stream powers a waterwheel. Without the war, there would be no energy to sustain existence. That is why there can never — *must* never —be stalemate; or the world would become crippled, dim, and sick, stale as a month-old muffin . . .

"What wheel does the stream of war power? Why, it powers this fine city of ours and the whole realm. Thousands of human lives — loves, hopes, creations — are the flour that is ground out by that wheel from the grain of time. Thousands of beasts and birds and buildings, villages and vines and fields, oxcarts and fishing boats: those are the bread from that flour. We are at war so that the kingdom can live. Fruitfully, busily, richly." He touched another book with his finger. "Before the dust comes again."

We adjourned to the bishop's apartment, where he began to teach me diagonal magic; for when a pawn-squire attacks, he does so crosswise .

On other days, old Beno coached me in the magical language. I've already mentioned one potent phrase and a stray word or two, and I don't intend to utter many more. I might burn a hole in your ears!

Some I can't help but mention. A lot of our place names were actually words in the magic language, sometimes altered a bit by popular usage. Thus: the Colina Calley, the Vodopad Waterfall, the Samostan, our own river Rehka . . . many such names. I hadn't realized this till Beno explained, but it made — if you'll forgive the pun — sound sense. If our kingdom was sustained by the magical war, magic place names were the nails by which parts of the world were fastened into place.

On other days, Prince Ruk taught me straightforward magic, the normal technique for a pawn-squire. A prince could take many magic steps at once, a pawn only one. Still, a squire in the right place might prove as devastating as a prince.

Ruk was high, handsome, and haughty, with wavy blond hair and ice-blue eyes. He was a tower of strength and ungrudging in his training of me, yet with him I never felt the sense of zany imagination that I did with Veck. Veck showed me how to skip mentally aslant and view the world askew; with Ruk there was al-

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ways the blunt, unswerving thrust of power. Could a squire forget that Ruk had once destroyed his own squire by thrusting through his body?

Time flashed by. I grew familiar with palace ways, and accustomed to what passed for peace — no magical event had occurred since I arrived.

The king continued to absorb himself in art, conjuring up and imprisoning weirdly warped scenes within bubbles upon which he set a seal of permanence. The queen commissioned new stained-glass windows and glass garments, and occasionally considered her eidolons. The four princesses grew taller and more womanly, though still as mischievous. About once a month, Margarita made my body sing in tune with hers.

A year was soon up; then, before I knew it, two. At last I was put through my paces before the queen. Alyitsa sang up her eidolons, and I moved amidst them. Veck partnered me in a mock magical attack upon Prince Ruk. Finally I defended the queen herself against a joint attack by Veck and Ruk. Having passed all the tests, I transferred my few belongings to a higher room with a vista across palace roofs and town beyond.

A week later, Veck summoned me to the Bibliotek and told me that I had Her Majesty's permission to go home for a fortnight. Whilst in town, though, I must do a service for the queen. I must acquaint myself by night with the Seveno district; then, on the tenth night, I should visit the Zupsko Tavern. An agent of Bishop Slon would contact me and point out a suspected spy. From there on, I should use my initiative, to misinform the spy or trap him into revealing information.

"Such as what?" I asked. "Misinform how?"

"That's up to you, Pedino. If I guide, you, you'll merely be a puppet acting out a role."

"If Bishop Slon believes this person's a spy, why doesn't he take him on? I mean, Slon's much more powerful than I." In the past two years, I had grown taller and filled out, yet I was still only a youth — to be pitted against a spy. I had pawnmagic on my side, but the spy had expertise.

Was this a final test? Was the spy only a pretend one, who would report back to Slon on how I acquitted myself? I discarded this idea. I had to behave as though the suspect was an actual spy.

Veck smiled faintly. Or did he wince? "Bishop Slon is *too* powerful to deal with a possible spy. He's too consequential. He can't be seen haunting Seveno. A squire can." Veck produced a dagger from under his dalmatic. "For you, from the queen. Your own magical dagger, at last." (I had been loaned a blade for training, and for the tests.)

I weighed the weapon in my hand. I spoke a magic word, and blue fire sparkled.

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"It has ordinary uses, too, in brawls and tight corners," Veck reminded me.

"Am I supposed to . . . *kill* this spy? If he is a spy."

"You must make your own mind up. Sharpen your instincts."

"A spy might think to sharpen his wits on my ribs." I remember the queen saying that spies did not assassinate. Maybe not by habit. What if a dagger-fumbling squire challenged or tempted a spy?

The queen surely wouldn't be willing to sacrifice me so lightly, to so little advantage? Unless . . . my own humble maneuvers masked some fiercer move against Chorny by herself or Ruk or Brant.

Veck touched his cheek-patch as though he had just felt the prick of a poniard.

"Don't be nervous," he said. "No harm will come to you. Be insouciant and easy, that's the best way to behave. You're a squire on holiday. Wear ordinary clothes, incognito. Enjoy yourself. Learn to drink. Be a little wicked. Margarita must have shown you how."

I believe I blushed.

The bishop trailed his index finger through dust and anointed me upon the brow.

I sneezed. Not because I had got some dust up my nostrils, but because of the thought of Margarita, and of other Margaritas who might haunt Seveno by night. Sudden strong sexual thoughts sometimes made me sneeze explosively. This sneeze raised dust from half a shelf of books. Veck wafted it gently away from us.

Maybe you just sank a boat on Lake Riboo." he joked. "Or caused an avalanche down Mount Planina."

Did Isgalt, at this stage, possess much by way of a soul? Was there something special that marked her out from her cousins? Her chums, confidantes, and competitors. Perhaps!

The four royal princesses — Isgalt, Ysa, Aseult, and Izold — were lovely, willful, naughty creatures who had flitted about the palace giggling and tinkling like exotic crystalline birds, like enchantress sprites from some woodcutter's tale of the Shooma Forest.

As they matured, they grew more distinct. Isgalt was wistful; Ysa was fiery and short-tempered; Aseult, cheerful and capricious, impulsive; Izold, cunning and capable of cruelty.

Originally they had seemed more like four humors of the same person, than independent individuals. One was at a loss on her own. The others couldn't bear any of their number to be separated, or secretive, for too long. Their favorite game of all— which stimulated the most urgent emotional tension, as well as the sweetest, sharpest release — was hide-and-seek. The hectic concealments and chases through all the

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courts and corridors and little gardens were a physical analogy of what went on constantly in the cousins' minds: a braid of hidings and confidings, conspiracies and heart-barings, fleeting quarrels and assuagements. Woe betide any kitchen boys or junior flunkies foolish enough to be lured into choosing sides in a prank, dazzled or charmed by one or other of the cousins. Their patroness would soon enough desert them, letting the outsider fend for himself against three peeved princesses.

Yes Isgalt did seem genuinely to be drawing apart from her cousins, becoming her own person, resisting teasing, blandishment, and the cloyingness of reconciliation. Was the reason simply her native wistfulness? Was she losing ground against their ardor, buoyancy, and clever calculation? Or was she riding above the kittenish humors of the others?

On the eve of my holiday, I met Isgalt loitering alone in the Turquoise Gallery. This gallery was tiled in blue, and the domed ceiling was painted sky-blue; the paint had flaked, exposing white cloud shapes. The skylight was a giant eye with a tiny pupil and huge blue iris. The wooden frame formed eyelids. A few hanging cobwebs imitated eyelashes.

Display stands resembling large wooden eggcups held various bubbles blown and fixed by King Karol. Within, lakes curved into waterfalls and hills rolled upward to become thunderclouds. One 'scape always caught my attention. It was a view of Bellogard from Islozba Hill to the north. However, the palace and town buildings were stretching up into the sky as though roofs and walls were made of baker's dough; of glue that an invisible foot had just trodden in. Withdrawing, the offending foot pulled the substance of the city after it, attenuating every edifice into dissolving blobs and threads. A divination of our apocalypse, this? Or merely a random fancy on the king's part? It was this bubble that Isgalt was contemplating.

"Squire Pedino! You surprised me."

"Apologies, Princess!" Something in her look — haunted and wide-eyed —impelled me to add, "Does that bubble disturb you?"

"Death disturbs me." She tapped the bubble with silvered fingernails. "Can Bellogard dissolve and disappear like this?"

"Ah, once you have confronted death," I said brightly, "then you are truly alive, and human. What does a dog know of death? Or a bird, or a horse?"

She smiled. "So you view my cousins and myself as fillies? Or is it peahens, or bitches?"

"Peahens are dowdy," I protested.

"That narrows the field! Bitches or fillies."

To distract her, I quoted something that Veck had said. "Our world is a fluctuation in a void, Princess.

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Out of nothing it comes. Back into nothing it goes again. In the interval we exist. Subsequently another world appears."

She surprised me by an earnest reply. "Yet our actions determine the length of that interval, do they not?"

"Aye, they do, I suppose. If we try to prolong the interval merely by procrastination—"

"The elastic sinews of the world grow slack? As in this bubble here?"

"I never thought of that! This bubble might warn of slackness, eh? You could be right. Our city losing shape and form . . . in a way that's worse than the death of dust."

"That what?"

"Have you ever hidden in the Bibliotek?" I asked on impulse.

"That awful dirty place! Certainly not. Princesses would soil their dresses there." Her smile was wry and mocking. Yet if she was mocking me, I felt that she was mocking herself more. "Hmm, why shouldn't I soil my dress?" (She was wearing a cloth of embroidered Madonna lillies hung with glass medallions.) "And my hair, and face, and hands?"

She touched her hair, which was yellow, ringleted. She touched her soft, downy cheeks as though for the first time she felt her own existence. She licked her rose-petal lips. Tears moistened her blue eyes.

To me, now somewhat experienced in Margarita's caresses, there was an innocence to Isgalt's touching of herself; and also a sudden horrid knowledge. Isgalt was feeling the skull beneath the softness, the raw bleached canvas under the pastel picture.

"Have you ever opened a book in the Bibliotek?" I asked recklessly.

"A book? No. Why should I?"

"Because . . . because she who would be queen must know the emptiness; so that the kingdom can be firm."

"Hmm, my cousin Izold would be a firmer queen than I. Hard, and clever."

"And cruel?" I dared to add.

"Cruel as Chorny's queen; possibly. Surely darkness should be opposed by light, not by darkness of a different caliber! Yet I can't believe our own queen will ever fail."

"She's weaker than Dama was."

"I would be weaker still."

"But kind. When the magic descends, maybe you could hold more than Alyitsa? Perhaps you could reverse Bellogard's fortunes."

"So, Pedino, you're a queenmaker as well as a squire?"

"I'm sorry, I presume. My tongue runs away."

"No matter. Will you squire me to the Bibliotek? Will you show me those books of yours?"

So I went with Isgalt to that dusty chamber, took down one of many volumes titled *Kneegu*, and showed her its blank pages.

"Here is the emptiness," I said.

"If I'm ever queen," she replied,

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"I shall take a pen and illustrate these books. I shall fill their pages with beautiful pictures before the dust can fill them."

I had spoken oh so boldly — brashly — to Isgalt about the maturity that staring death in the face conveys; as if, by virtue of witnessing attempted assassination at the Samostan and causing death myself at the Razval baths, I were an expert.

I had never confronted my own death.

This was to happen as climax to my holiday in town . . .

First, the holiday itself.

For so long I'd been observing Bellogard from the palace heights, diminished by distance. Suddenly the busy buzz of town life surrounded me again — markets and rushing river, chatter and errand boys, tradesfolk, the whole motley — and all that had been no more than a tiny, slow spectacle was accelerated and doused with noise and smell and savor, with vigorous sensation. It still seemed strangely toylike, as though *I* had shrunk and strolled into a dolls' house, a dolls' town. I had altered my perspectives.

In my absence, Sister Drina had become a young lady. In doing so, she seemed to me to have exchanged one type of babyishness for another. She had adopted the more mature childishness of grooming herself for a suitor who would presently relieve her of responsibility for thinking, acting, working, or suffering any upsets.

Perhaps this was my fault! Even, my crime. When I thought back on how I had tried to protect Drina from the likes of A. Mog (bearing in mind Margarita's explanation), I realized the extent to which I must have oppressed my sister in many ways, robbed her of initiative, laid out a future course for her by which she would seek, as soon as possible, a brother substitute.

Boris Slad, now a trainee banker in his father's countinghouse, was courting Drina; and my parents nodded glad approval at the prospective match, which shouldn't occur for two more years. Dana Slad, fast becoming a belle and source of broken hearts, smiled upon Drina as would-be sister-in-law. It puzzled me why the rich Slads should be so eager to ally themselves with a pipemaker's family. Then the halfcrown dropped. I was the reason. Boris would ally himself royally, by association. So I had doubly decided Drina's destiny. This grieved me. Margarita might have bedded me at Slon's request, but *her* hands were definitely independent agents.

Viewed in another light, here was a further proof of how the power of life itself diffused outward from the palace, not in any obvious way such as by edicts, honors, patronage, or fashion — or, alternately, apprehension caused by dungeons or execu-

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tioners! — but in the most fundamental, "existential" aspect.

Back in the house on Chalk Street, I felt snuggly at home amidst the aromas of tobacco only to the extent that an orphan lamb (so they say) is comforted by its dead mother's fleece being roped on a substitute ewe. The scent persuades, even if the touch is wrong. The familiarity of Bellogard, the pleasant regularity of life, made me feel awkward.

It wasn't *merely* to heed the queen's instructions that I quickly took myself off to explore Seveno. Formerly that area of Bellogardian life had been a mystery to me. Now, in its very unfamiliarity, it seemed authentic and desirable — a zone where the town redeemed, rather than belittled, itself. That may have been why nominally decent townsfolk patronized the district under the cover of darkness. They felt substantiated.

It was early autumn, so dahlias dominated the public gardens. By day, flower borders looked like aquarium tanks crowded with big, bright sea anemones. My own eyes were more intent on the flowers of the night: the myriad rainbow lantern strung outside Seveno's bars and dancing halls and casinos; the orange lamps hung in the windows of "houses of ladies" to lure visiting male moths.

Here was I, admiring the *salle blanche* of the Grand Salon de Chance: white marble walls, water-lily chandeliers, ornate ormolu clocks, green lawns of baccarat and roulette tables. A wide spiral stairway wended upward to the *salle privée.*

I'd purchased a halfcrown entry ticket from the commissariat. A cadaverous man wearing an impeccable cream suit and mulberry bow tie beckoned me discreetly aside.

"Gospodin." To my consternation, he addressed me quietly using a polite mode from the magic language. I was wearing ordinary trousers and jacket, a striped shirt, a floppy neckerchief, certainly not my palace uniform. My poniard was hidden in my inside breast pocket.

"Pardon," he murmured, "but you have magic. May I remind you that you must not play downstairs? A player with known magic must use the *salle privée* upstairs, by arrangement with the management. The odds are different there. Of course you may watch the proceedings here."

"What makes you think I'm magical? I've never been here in my life before."

The cadaver permitted himself a faint smile. "I'm this casino's physiognomist, *Gospodin.* I know almost every face in Bellogard, and many country faces, too. I know the gait of everyone. A certain dishonest farmer may visit town once a year wearing false whiskers, yet I know him. I walk about town every day, memorizing. If someone cheats here once, they are barred forever. Not that I impute any such motive to you, you understand?"

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"Actually I wasn't planning to place any bets — much less use guile! I don't happen to know the rules."

"In another hour you may know them, and grow excited. However, I'm discretion incarnate. I needn't reveal your identity to the table supervisors, *Gospodin*. I merely make a subtle signal; and you fail to find a seat."

"Is yours a magic skill?" (*How* did he know me?)

"No. A matter of observation and memory. You're the pipemaker's lad. I used to notice you on your way to the Gymnasium. Later I spotted news items in *Noveeny*: a certain episode at the Razval baths, your palace appointment."

What an ideal fellow to spot a spy! Maybe the physiognomist tipped off our agents in town. Yet I was sure that he wasn't the person I was due to meet at the Zupsko Tavern the following week. There was an obsessional pedantry about the physiognomist that didn't fit my concept of an agent.

I watched the roulette and baccarat a while. More interesting to me than the activities of croupiers and the gambling gentry of Bellogard and their fine ladies was a certain fat woman. Dressed in rosy silks, ruby necklace, and domino mask, she strolled the *salle*, inspecting play through a pair of opera glasses mounted on a bamboo rod, and holding court betweenwhiles on a sofa. A succession of solo gentlemen sat by her, chatting softly. They generally gave her presents of high-value chips or plaques.

I stopped a valet. "Excuse me, but who is that lady?"

"She is the Prophetess, sir. Supposedly she recommends winning systems."

"Supposedly?"

The valet cleared his throat. "She makes arrangements, too. For the subsequent amusements of gentlemen."

I thought of Margarita. I imagined myself sitting by the Prophetess, describing my tastes to her — such as I imagined those to be, based on the slightest of experience!

Ah, but I had no plaques or chips to give her, nor any way to acquire them . . .

So here was I later that night in a less elegant, more typical casino, kibitzing a rowdy game where dice were tossed along green baize marked with lines and boxes for bets. No physiognomist accosted me. Even so, I avoided joining any games of hazard.

Here was I in a noisy bar-restaurant, devouring fried horsemeat steak and lovely lumpy potato salad, washed down with black beer.

And here was I, tipsy in Pozoristu Street, loitering over the way from one of its "theaters." I crossed and bought a ticket — for all of three crowns, but I'd received a large purse from the palace for expenses. I joined a small audience of men in a dark,

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smoky room to watch a dance-striptease while a jangly piano played waltzes.

Afterward I walked down Groody Lane past windows with orange lamps. Women and girls sat in the lamplight wearing petticoats or negligees. Some were knitting, others playing patience. I thought again of Margarita. I thought of Princess Isgalt. I walked on home.

Next day toward noon, I retraced my route of the previous night, but everything had become demure and orderly.

My commission from the palace: to steep myself in Seveno. Did this mean that I had a positive duty to patronize Groody Lane? I thought about this and decided, "Why not indeed?"

"You're keeping late hours," my mother observed as we sat at our family meal of dumplings, sausages, and mushrooms. "Is that what you've learned at the palace? Unless you're out visiting a friend, it strikes me there's only one part of Bellogard where you could stay so late."

"My boy has grown up," observed my father mildly.

My sister toyed with her food. "It wouldn't do to bring shame. To disgrace one's position at the palace."

"My point exactly," said Mum. "I'm thinking of how the Slads might regard any sort of . . . scandal."

So that was it. Hints had been dropped. Mother and Drina would rather I donned my squire's uniform with buttons well polished and promenaded my sister around Terga Square of an evening, pausing at one of the cafés for glasses of spritzer with lots of soda water to dilute the light muscat wine.

"Mother," I said. "I have a reason for where I go and what I do. A squire isn't an ornament. A squire is a soldier. I'm on holiday. I'm also on the queen's business."

"Didn't I tell you as much?" said Dad.

"What business?" Drina asked excitedly.

I shook my head. "I *do* have a full soul," I reminded her.

Drina cried a little, then cheered up.

Later, cloaked in night, I passed along Groody Lane, peeping in at the ladies sitting by their lamps. I wasn't the only such window shopper. Behind one window a slim young woman sat in her petticoat at a little table, turning over playing cards. She had fine, delicate features framed by a cascade of crinkly black hair. I wandered on by, then halted. I felt compelled to hasten back. I tapped on the glass. She started, looked, nodded her head in the direction of the door, and extinguished her lamp.

She met me in the dark hall, a black ghost smelling of jasmine. A single candle flickered at the stairhead. She asked me a few inconsequential questions — mainly about

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the weather — before naming a price; for the rest of the night? Or only an hour? I chose the night and paid. She hid the crowns somewhere in the hall, then locked the front door and led me upstairs, collecting the candle as she passed. She ushered me into a large bedroom, where she lit a second candle. The two candles combined yielded less light than her downstairs lamp, but the lamp had given her skin the look of orange peel. Her flesh now took on a buttery hue.

As she hoisted her petticoat over her head, I sneezed violently three times.

Oddly, I'd expected that making love to her might feel radically different, as regards the main sensations, from making love to Margarita. I remember when I first saw another boy's penis at school, in the urinals, it had looked different from my own. This was because the other boy was uncircumcised. At the time I drew the logical yet absurd conclusion that every boy's penis was of a unique character, as diversely designed as faces are.

Likewise I somehow expected the act of sex with another women to produce unexpected joys. The ultimate pang of pleasure might taste as different as peaches from pears.

No so, of course. I felt that I'd traveled to a distant province where all sights and scents were strange, only to taste, from an unknown bottle, a familiar, delicious wine.

"What's your name?" I asked as we lay together later.

"Sara," she said, and rubbed my nose with hers. "What's yours?"

I hesitated.

"No need to tell! I shall call you Karol, since you're my king for tonight. Should I blow the candles out, Karol? Should we sleep?"

"I'll blow them out for you."

"You might stub your big toe in the dark."

She slipped naked from the sheets and went to extinguish the wicks. I watched her. Big toe, indeed.

The days — no, the nights— slipped by; and soon I knew Seveno pretty well. I also got to know Sara more deeply. Maybe it was unenterprising to revisit her time and again, but I found her sweet and friendly. I could hardly stay away. She liked to fantasize that I was a royal Price Karol who had slipped from the palace at dead of night to her bed. She stroked my ego playfully.

Since the fantasy wasn't far from the truth, I felt nervous at first, then happily acquiesced and invented bizarre tales of palace life. I said that the alabaster soldiers on the ramparts were former lovers of Queen Dama, now enchanted by magic. I told her that the king imprisoned his enemies inside glass bubbles. I declared that the four princesses dwelled underground in a huge maze. And other such nonsense as this.

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Surprisingly, nobody else was ever with her when I called. We did not speak of other visitors. Ours was a grand, royal passion.

On the ninth night of my holiday, I whispered to her in bed, "I'll have to go away soon. Duties of state! I shan't see you, maybe for weeks and weeks."

She kissed me on the shoulder. "Let me see: you're really an underchef in the palace kitchens. You cook the king's feasts. Or a flunky; you serve them. Or maybe a guard. You know all the secret passages."

"What secret passages?"

"Aren't there any? Oh dear. A palace without secrets."

She stroked me intimately, and I paid no further attention to royal palaces, only to the palace of her limbs.

I sat in one of the oaken booths of the Zupsko Tavern, sipping light beer. A Gypsy played a wailing, maudlin violin; his melodies wove in and out of the laughter and tipsy talk like a swallow darting through a storm. A buxom waitress was forever on the go with fistfuls of beer mugs, glasses of vinyak liquor, plates of the house specialties: pig's knuckle, cabbage leaves stuffed with mince and rice.

Who should slip in opposite me but Master Samo?

"Evening, Pedino."

"Oh, hello, Dominie. What a surprise! You look well, sir. I'm, um, waiting for someone."

His eyes twinkled. "And someone has arrived!" He signaled the waitress, managing at once to catch her eye and to mime an order.

She rushed a glass of grape brandy to him. "So, Sammy, how's the world treating you?" She didn't hang about for an answer. I gathered that he was a habitué.

"Treating me well enough, I suppose," he told me, as though it were I who asked. "Although I'm only of slight soul, which must always cast a shadow over one's antics."

The hastening waitress stopped to confide, "He's a real card, this one. Watch yourself, young fellow-me-lad." And off she went.

"As well as being a good motive for antics," Samo continued. "To drown the darkness, don't you know? But one still serves the palace loyally. The palace bestows life itself — however long that lasts. Better to serve as a shadow — offering Chorny no real target — than as a substantial soul. I tell myself so, anyway." He drank his brandy. "Don't look now, but the fellow in question is four booths down on your right, facing this way."

"Our suspect." I stared resolutely into my beer.

"He's been lurking all over — by the palace walls, the Samostan— painting little grisailles on glass panes. Supposedly some artist from Letto province. The queen, of course, is devoted to glass art."

"What are grisailles, exactly?"

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"Paintings done without color; entirely in shades of gray. Verges on the black arts of Chorny, hmm? The artist's name is Meshko. Good Lettish name."

"Isn't his behavior a bit public for a spy?"

"The perfect excuse! An artist has to arouse curiosity. How else could he sell his work?"

As the Gypsy advanced toward us, sawing his violin, I had an opportunity to stare in Meshko's direction. The man was stocky, with broad, open features. He might have been clean-shaven that morning, but by now his jowls were purple-shadowed with fast-renascent beard. He wore a leather jerkin; tough blue serge trousers; a wide, floppy felt hat decorated with pheasant feathers. Black curls peeped out. His eyes were chestnut; his brows dark and woolly. He looked soberer than his drinking companions. Casually, I transferred my attention to the musician.

"He might be drawing coded maps," murmured Samo. "Or magic ink pictures to provide a bridge back to Chorny. Or he might be a lure for our queen; a bait. Over to you, Pedino." Samo prepared to leave.

"Hang on: has anyone tried to get reports from Letto on this artist fellow? The man can't have hatched out unnoticed under a vine."

"Reports prove nothing. The Meshko you see here may not be the same Meshko who set out for the capital. He might have been magicked; his crumb of soul overwhelmed. I must be on my way."

Samo departed with a cheery wave, leaving me to my booth and beer.

It wasn't hard to fall in with Meshko. He broke into a lusty song; which I applauded. I bought him a beer to wet his whistle. I said I'd spotted him down by the Samostan, painting on glass.

"Can't say when for sure. I hardly know what today is!"

"You on holiday, then?" he asked.

"Exactly!" I lowered my voice. "From the palace."

And so forth. Soon he was inviting me to visit his "studio" the following afternoon.

Now a lad like me was unlikely to be a prospective purchaser of glass grisailles. Why should Meshko give up some of his precious afternoon light to show me round unless he was rather more interested in my palace connections? I'd been indefinite about these — I hadn't confided that I was actually the queen's squire — but I'd dropped hints. I'd also told him that I was in debt at the Grand Salon and that I'd pawned a family heirloom to raise the crowns that I'd let him glimpse in my purse. I needed a decent win at baccarat to redeem myself. After a few drinks at the Zupsko Tavern that evening to steady my nerves, I was bound for the Salon de Chance (upstairs or downstairs, I did not say); but no, I

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did not wish for company. Once there, I must concentrate totally.

The studio proved to be an attic over an alley five minutes' walk from Pozoristu Street. It contained dozens of views of Bellogard meticulously painted on panes in shades of gray. ("Ashen, oyster, dove, pearly, smoky, charcoal, leaden, and special *seevo* gray," Meshko explained.) Many were stacked. Some stood on narrow homemade easels. Others hung on the walls, though this did not show them to best effect; since ideally light should shine through. A table bore tiny brushes, a palette, a pestle and mortar, jars of ingredients: oils and gloomy minerals. An unmade bed occupied one corner.

My host polished glasses on a hand towel and filled them from an already open bottle of muscat.

"If only I could paint *inside* the palace!" he exclaimed. "I've heard there are such enchanting courts and gardens."

"Hmm," I said. The red Lettish vintage was sweet and heavy, like sugary blood.

"Is it possible, I wonder—?"

"You would need truly magic paint," I said lightly, "to capture yon palace."

His hand shook; he spilled some wine. Then he laughed. "My little brushes are my magic."

"Of course."

"Why do you carry a hidden dagger, Dino?" (I'd given him this name.) My turn to spill a drop. "Do I?"

"When you shift your shoulder thus, there's a slight bulge."

"Oh, that. I believe there's a war going on, isn't there?"

"The war with Chorny? That's surely fought with tools other than blades." (Not exactly.) "Do you fear cutpurses in Seveno? I suppose there are some. I find Bellogard a very safe town."

"Compared with what?"

"Why, with Letto province. Bandits hide out in the marshes. There's military trouble on the borderland. Incursions. A village burned. Would it be possible, do you suppose, to peep inside the palace? Naturally I wouldn't exhibit or sell any private palace views."

"In that case, why paint them?"

"To pick up the atmosphere — in case of a future royal commission. My work's starting to sell modestly, to discerning local burghers. I could afford a few crowns to grease a guard's palm, if need be. That's wholly at your discretion, my friend. I would entrust the money to you, asking no further questions."

"How many crowns?" I asked.

"Twenty? Maybe I could stretch to thirty."

"You *must* have sold a few panes of glass!"

"Oh, I don't let them go for a song. I'd rather starve than cheapen them. Anyhow, I had the forethought to bring a small sum of savings with

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me. How did your own luck fare last night?"

"Rotten. I *nearly* pulled it off, damn it!"

He paced. "Oh, the beauty, the grace of gray. I find bright colors rather brash. Letto is a gray district. One grows sensitive to nuances, Dino."

While Meshko rhapsodized to himself artistically and refrained from watching me too eagerly, I, too, wandered the attic, apparently deep in thought.

I spotted an edge of paper under a discarded shirt, draped to hide it. Casually blocking Meshko's view with my body, I shifted the cotton, found a sketchpad. I turned a page. And my heart stood still.

Here was a charcoal drawing of Sara, stripped to the waist. I flipped quietly, saw several other portraits of Sara. Hastily I shut the pad, pulled the shirt back.

I swung round. "Thirty crowns should buy you entry."

"Oh, marvelous."

"Just for a couple of hours, understand?"

"Fine. When?"

"Day after tomorrow?"

With Meshko's money in my purse, I hastened to the Samostan. I took a roundabout route to make sure I wasn't being followed. On the way I had time to think about what I'd seen in the sketchpad.

Item: Sara's playful interest in the palace and its secrets, our little masquerade of prince and paramour.

Item: whenever I visited Groody Lane, she had been available, as though reserved for me alone. The first occasion might have been coincidence; not thereafter.

Item: Meshko must be as besotted with her as I was. His sketches were so richly sensual. He hadn't spent a night with her recently. Yet he had money.

Maybe the money came from her. She was controlling Meshko, subsidizing him; permitting him to sketch her at her convenience in return for services. Such as painting strategic scenes and trying to breach the palace. Had she let Meshko bed her, too?

What had Veck said to me once during training? "Magic often gravitates to magic." I hadn't really chosen Sara's door at random. She possessed magic; my undermind had sensed this.

If so, Sara was more than a mere spy. She must be the missing black squire. She hadn't yet made her first magic move; her eidolon couldn't yet be observed on the chequerboard.

I might be totally wrong: that was why I wanted to consult Slon. When I arrived at the Samostan, however, the bishop wasn't there. He and Prince Ruk had gone hunting. They wouldn't be back till late at night. I debated sending an urgent message to the hunting lodge. I debated rushing to

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the palace to ask the queen to sing the summoning of the eidolons. Both courses of action seemed hysterical, lacking in initiative. Should a squire hasten to his queen to confess that he has fallen in love with a whore down Groody Lane and suspects that her heart is black, not white?

Two days hence, I had undertaken to smuggle Meshko into the palace; there was that to bear in mind as well.

I couldn't bear to think of Sara checked for years in the palace dungeons . . . Had she possessed Meshko, as Samo surmised? Or merely intoxicated him — as she had intoxicated me?

Could Samo advise? Hardly. He was only an agent.

Use your instinct, I'd been told.

So I used it. That night I went to Groody Lane.

Sara's orange lamp burned bright as a beacon, apparently for no one else but me. Hers was a clever cover for an enemy power (though how could I think of her as an enemy?). Who would query or distrust a whore? A whore who needn't be abroad by day, when physiognomists were about. A whore who could receive any number of visitors at odd hours, visitors who wished to remain discreet. A whore, who wasn't quite a whore . . .

How *did* she deter unpromising customers? Did she have to apologize often? "Sorry if you rapped on the glass, sir, but I'm waiting for somebody else." Did she use some love-magic taught her by Queen Babula to make the majority of mundane men pass by?

I rapped. She immediately doused her lamp, admitted me. "Ah, my prince has come!" She preceded me upstairs to that room which was haunted with my joy.

Had Meshko reported success in suborning a palace employee? Did Sara connect me with the employee in question? Maybe not, as yet. She might be playing two games that hadn't yet come together.

Would Sara have seen an eidolon of *me* in some black chamber in Chorny, and known me at once? Maybe not. She couldn't have traveled to Bellogard directly by magic. She must have come wanderingly on horseback or even on foot, a journey of weeks or months. She might have arrived a year ago, two years ago.

"Aren't you going to undress, Karol?" Sara had already done so, and was sitting on the bed. She held out her slim arms. I ached for her.

I shook my head. "You hop into the sheets, love. As this is our last time, I'd like to tell you who I really am."

Naked, wrapped up in bed, she could hardly pose much threat to a reasonably muscular, fully clad, armed youth. Obediently, she pulled a sheet up her body, though she let a breast poke out.

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"It's a long story, Sara."

"I'm all ears. Why not tell it in comfort?"

I grinned. "If you were *only* ears, I might." I, too, could keep up a pretense.

So I began to tell her the story of my life to date, much as I'm doing now, though omitting my commission to uncover a spy . . .

"You've been wanting to know all along how magic *really* works, haven't you, Sara?"

"Yes."

"All your life you've been aware of magic as a distant background. What are the tools and techniques, eh? What does one actually *do*? The question a young virgin puts to her best friend?

"I've dropped hints: the magic language, weapons (sometimes) that bristle with lightning — and body movements (forward, diagonally, a skip aside).

"I think the main point is that people like me occupy mundane space and also magical space. Mundane space is huge, the size of a couple of kingdoms. Magical space is smaller. Not simpler, oh no! A thousand million permutations of position and action are possible. Lines of force are forever opening up or blocking one another. Along these lines of force, we can leap. To strike or counterstrike," I paused.

"Go on, Prince Karol. Or should I say, Squire?"

"Of course you already know all this extremely well, don't you, Sara?" I slipped the poniard from inside my jacket. "That's why I ought to kill you now. *Opasnost po Zhivot*, Sara!"

"You're mad!" she cried. "You're one of those twisted men who hurt and kill women like me. They always need an excuse. A pretext to justify their filthy crime! They need to believe the woman is evil." She threw the sheet aside. "Look at me. Look. I shan't cover myself to make murder easier. To make it like stabbing a pillow."

I almost believed her. Almost.

"I should kill you, black page," I said, "to save you from a miserable lifetime held in check in a dungeon."

"To . . . save me?" her voice faltered. "I think that killing me might be a cruel kindness."

"If only you could change sides! Chorny is evil and ruthless. Look how they've used you."

"Haven't *you* used me?"

"Maybe at first — but not subsequently, Sara. You know that! And I no more used you, than you were using me, whatever your cajolery. The body tells the truth. The undermind knows."

In one fluid movement, she was out of bed, standing poised beside it. "We all do what we have to do, my lover."

"No, we do what we *choose* to do."

She no longer denied that she was

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from Chorny, I noticed.

"By winning," I said, "we lose. We lose the whole world."

She shook her head. To dispel confusion?

Her hands stiffened. Those gentle hands took on a fighting, chopping edge. She chanted a few phrases in the magical language as spoken in Chorny. I held my dagger toward her and spoke words that made it flash and sparkle with blue fire. She took a pace toward me. Her hands were sheathed with crackling blue.

Thunder crashed shockingly outside again and again. Through her window I saw lightning dancing madly over Bellogard. I felt awful tensions in those lines of force that connected me to other white magics in the realm. I sensed hewings, dartings, slashings.

Surely a major assault had begun. Black Squire Sara had been exposed, was being sacrificed — and the royal powers of Chorny were attacking.

She took another step toward me; another.

Without signaling my intention, I leapt aslant—to take her and stab her.

I didn't stab. At the last moment I reversed my dagger and clubbed her on the side of the head with the pommel.

She collapsed.

I rushed downstairs out into Groody Lane. Soon I was sprinting along Pozoristu Street, where night strollers had taken refuge in theater doorways in case lightning toppled chimneys. Goaded by intuition rather than by any rational plan, I raced out of Seveno. Instinct told me not to leap magically, but to run.

I ought to have been checking the captured squire, binding and gagging her with torn-up sheets. If I'd killed her, I would still have been in her room. Instead I found myself in Terga Square, poniard in hand. I leaned against a pillar fronting a café, to recover my breath.

A figure in a black dalmatic ran diagonally across the deserted square. He trampled through a bed of dahlias. He rushed over the road in my direction — not that he had seen me. Soon he would run right away — all the way back by magic to where he had come from. He scattered café seats, left out for the night. He would pass right by me, unsuspecting.

I stepped out. I recognized the man's startled face, from his eidolon. It was Bishop Zorn of Chorny. I spoke magic and stabbed him through the heart.

The following day, we survivors of that brutal nocturnal exchange gathered in the Chequer Chamber.

Queen Alyitsa was dead — murdered by Prince Feryava of Chorny. Bishop Slon was dead, killed by Bishop Zorn. Squire Iris was dead, protecting Bishop Veck.

The survivors were: the king, Bishop Veck, Sir Brant, Prince Ruk, and five of us squires. Henchy was injured; his wrist had been broken. It

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would stay that way for the rest of his life. Magical injuries did not heal unless you killed the person who inflicted them. Henchy's right arm hung in a white sling.

Young Pyeshka was perspiring nervously. So, for that matter, was I.

"We must crown a new queen immediately," insisted Veck.

Ruk demurred. "The new queen would have only half of Queen Alyitsa's strength. She would be able to move only two magic steps at once."

"She might never need to move more than two! At least she would have the omnidirectional queen-magic."

"It might be better to retain a simple squire," Sir Brant said.

And I understood: it wouldn't be the youngest squire — myself — who was sacrificed to create a new queen. I had acquitted myself admirably, astonishingly, by killing the enemy bishop. Insted, Pyeshka would be sacrificed; and Sir Brant was trying to protect his squire. (To all appearances, I'd distinguished myself! I hadn't confessed the full events of the previous night or how I'd spared the black squire in Groody Lane.)

"I present two arguments against," continued Sir Brant. "If we don't crown a new queen, the squire could still give us a new knight in extremis —at a crucial moment when a knight's askew move might save the kingdom from catastrophe. A queen could never leap askew. Second, we need that pawn-squire simply for the sake of extra numbers. Thanks to Pedino, an enemy bishop died last night. Did Bishop Slon or Squire Iris kill or injure anyone? We don't know. Did Chorny lose only one fighter? We lost three, and Henchy is disabled."

"That's exactly why we must urgently examine the eidolons," said Veck. "Only a queen can sing the summoning of those."

King Karol pulled out a pipe. "I could blow a bubble that might divine the future numbers on the board."

"How far into the future?" Veck frowned. "How accurately? Divination is a matter of probabilities, not certainties."

The king tucked his pipe away. "Yet I deserve a new queen, do I not? To invigorate me; to help me carry on cheerfully."

The argument circled round for a while, without us squires having much of a voice, though Veck was in vociferous vein. Finally King Karol clapped his hands and said, "The queen is dead. Let there be a new queen."

Prince Ruk and Sir Brant bowed their knees.

"Pyeshka," sighed Sir Brant, "oh, my Pyeshka." (Even though he was shaking, Pyeshka stood at attention.) "Proceed to the square before the queen's square."

Pyeshka did so.

"Now then, Beno," said King Karol, "go and fetch Princess, hmm, Prin-

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cess, let's see, Princess—"

"Isgalt," I said.

"Hmm? What? Eh? Yes, of course, Princess Isgalt. The best possible choice."

Prince Ruk protested. "Izold is more devious and forceful."

"Isgalt'll be the better bride in bed," said the king. "In my chamber. That matters, too."

"Majesty, this concerns the whole kingdom!"

"*I* agree with the nomination of Isgalt," said Veck. "I believe that young lady has depths."

"Beno," repeated the king, "fetch Princess, yes, *Isgalt*."

So Isgalt was fetched.

She was excited, nervous, happy, horrified. To be queen — but so soon! To wed — King Karol, who smirked at her. To have queenmagic descend on her, and promptly become a prime target for the savagery of Chorny.

She darted a glance at me as if for assistance. After all, I would soon be her squire. I smiled encouragement, yet it was Veck who by rights took her by the arm. He led her to stand on the vacant queen's square.

"Wait," said Isgalt. Veck raised an eyebrow.

Isgalt stepped round in front of Pyeshka. She laid a hand on his shoulder as if for mutual support.

"Be brave," she said, "then I will inherit your bravery, Pyeshka. Be true to the last; then I shall acquire your truth. Be strong without flinching; thus I shall be strong and never flinch. May you live in me until victory, until the whole world empties out." She kissed him on the cheek.

That was a very pretty speech. No, it was more than pretty; it was remarkable. Veck nodded his approval as the princess resumed her position.

Promptly Brant drew his sword. Without hesitating, he ran Pyeshka swiftly through. Poor Pyeshka's eyes opened ever so wide, and his mouth gaped, but he only uttered one terrible gasp, and died. Brant's sword had passed right through the page's vitals like a huge nail driven fearsomely through a fence post. The point stuck out, almost touching Isgalt. Blood had sprayed her flower dress in the belly region. Sir Brant was struggling, I saw how he was holding dead Pyeshka up by main force.

"Long live the queen!" cried Ruk.

Isgalt shut her eyes and rocked from side to side. She moaned, then began to sing to herself; magic words.

"Long live!" we all chorused.

Beno and Josip hurried to support the corpse. They held it firm while Brant wrenched his sword free, then they hauled Pyeshka away by the shoulders, heels dragging, to deposit him temporarily in the Ex-Chequer Chamber.

When Queen Isgalt opened her eyes again, I moved closer to attend her. Veck sketched a magic blessing.

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Karol advanced and kissed his bride. Isgalt didn't flinch.

Karol emitted a hearty chuckle. "Release all the news to *Noveeny*. I decree public mourning for three days, to be followed straightway by wedding festivities. Let there be royal banners on all spires, blaziers by night. Bells are to be rung. Notify the kitchens. Let Bellogard enjoy three days' holiday. A pageant at the Samostan. Wine running from the fountains. The usual."

"Of course," agreed Veck, "but let's consult the eidolons first. That's urgent."

Isgalt nodded. "I can summon them. The knowledge wells in me."

We stood back from the chequerboard. Isgalt sang, waveringly at first, then firmly.

Our own semblances took on phantom existence. Isgalt changed key, and the black forces appeared.

No eidolon for Bishop Zorn. And Prince Feryava's eidolon was injured! The black prince had been wounded in the leg. His image stood there crookedly, resting on a crutch.

"That'll shorten the bastard's moves," growled Henchy.

My main attention was on a different eidolon, one that I'd never seen before upon this board but whose face I knew . . . intimately. She was my lovely Sara.

"New squire," Ruk rapped out. "Their eighth. Young, female. Why did that one make her move; and where?"

I said nothing.

Might Sara still be in Bellogard? Surely not in Groody Lane. She would have woken soon after I hit her. I didn't think I had injured her. She would be fleeing back to Chorny.

Maybe I would learn something if Meshko turned up at our rendezvous the next day. *If* he turned up. In the wake of a battle royal, this seemed dubious, especially if Sara — his instigator and control — had disappeared. Did Meshko know that yet?

There was a fair chance that while Sara was busy playing me like a fish, she hadn't confided in Meshko, had even ordered him to keep out of the way for a couple of weeks. Meshko mightn't have tried to report back to her yet.

Two more things occurred to me in rapid succession. One was that I had to tell Veck something about Meshko, and soon. I'd been sent into town to investigate a suspect. Recent events had distracted everyone, but Veck would want a report.

When Meshko was questioned, as was inevitable, Veck might rapidly deduce that the new black pawn had made her move right here in Bellogard. What manner of move? An aimless, ineffective one? One that got sidetracked?

Would I be linked to Sara? Perhaps not. Perhaps not even by proximity, since I had turned up so soon after and to such good effect in Terga Square.

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The other thing that occurred to me was that Sara had laid long-term plans, into which I happened to fit conveniently. Meshko had only been getting into the swing of spying. Chorny had not intended to attack so soon. True, they had succeeded in eliminating our queen and a bishop and a pawn. In turn they had lost a bishop, and their prince had been injured. Their attack must have been premature. Presumably they'd hoped to inflict a more crushing defeat — but *I* had precipitated last night's battle by challenging Squire Sara.

So much, so much that I ought to tell! If I hurried up about it, one of our nobles might still overtake Sara. Why should I wish to protect her? Was it because of some cockeyed notion that Bellogard and Chorny might reach agreement in favor of perpetual stalemate, for which my sparing of Sara gave the prededent?

Or was it because I loved Sara and thought that she might truly love me, too, especially now that I'd spared her life and let her escape?

Yes. Yes. Love is absurd, irrational. Sara was magical to me in more ways than one.

If the truth came out, how would my colleagues regard a white squire who let a Chorny squire off the hook? Oh, they would have to applaud—because in passing her by, I'd placed myself advantageously in the way of the more powerful and dangerous Zorn, and had trounced him. However, they might applaud slowly.

Ruk waved at the eidolons. "This isn't too bad. In sum, Bellogard lost a queen but gained a replacement, albeit less puissant. We lost a bishop and two pawns, Pyeshko included, and sustained an injured pawn. Chorny lost a bishop and suffered an injured prince. It almost balances."

Directly after, I excused myself from the queen and reported to Veck. I told him a highly censored version of events — about Meshko, only Meshko — and managed to deter him from dispatching guards at once into town to seek the painter. ("Let him come here innocently." I argued. "Maybe he *is* moderately innocent. If not, he'll be far away by now.") It wasn't easy, but deter Veck I did. This was my operation, my initiative. I found that I'd accrued a certain persuasive aura of success as a squire who had slain a bishop.

Next I sought the queen, who was settling into her new royal chamber. "May I speak privately?"

Isgalt dismissed the maids who had been busily clearing away Alyitsa's belongings and replacing those with Isgalt's.

When we were alone, she smiled at me. "I suspect, my squire, that I may have *you* to thank for the fact that I'm queen."

How did she know that I had nominated her at the conference? Impulsively, against all etiquette?

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"You took me to the Bibliotek," she explained, noting my apparent puzzlement. "You showed me the emptiness at the heart of all. After that visit, during the past fortnight—of thinking and feeling — I believe I became queenworthy. I'm only uncertain as to whether I should thank you for this, or hate you."

"If I might make a suggestion, it's preferable not to hate one's squire."

She laughed. "In that case, I must thank you. Ask for something that's in my power to grant."

A boon, a reward, would naturally endear her to her henceforth faithful squire. Perhaps Isgalt did possess a streak of Izold's cleverness, though in much nicer style.

I swallowed a couple of times.

"As it happens, there *is* something . . ."

I told her everything.

I didn't gasp out my tale in confused or hangdog style like a naive stripling. I flatter myself that I presented events in lucid order, together with rationale and motive.

Does this sound unlike the lad who set out from the palace on holiday? Well, I'd changed since my nightly sojourns in Seveno. I'd changed since I stabbed a bishop mortally. And since I'd fallen in love with a spy, who was pretending to be a whore.

At the end of my account, Queen Isgalt mused a while; then said, with a blend of mischief and melancholy, "I think I see a neat solution . . ."

Meshko did indeed turn up at our rendezvous, which — to my mind, at least — established his naive artist's innocence. Innocence of any really dark evil.

He was arrested by the queen's personal guards, who had put off the glass armor of the previous reign on her orders and donned leather and brass.

To Veck's chagrin, Meshko was questioned in camera by Isgalt, then condemned by her to indefinite imprisonment — though not in any deep dungeon. His cell was to be an airy studio high atop a tower, with a special royal commission to fulfill. More of this in a moment.

Meanwhile the queen sent me hurriedly back into town, escorted by two guards in mufti. I went first to Meshko's lodgings, searched these, and took away his sketchbook with the portraits of Sara. Next I went to Groody Lane, but Sara had skipped, leaving only her flimsiest clothes behind.

Later Veck's men would turn Meshko's place over and bring back to the palace all his grisailles and painting equipment. At his lodgings they found a small supply of magic paint — as diagnosed by Veck — additional to the little bottle that Meshko had brought to our rendezvous. Sara must have managed to enchant the paint herself; unless she had somehow had this smuggled in from Chorny after suborning Meshko.

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Meshko swore (the queen told me) that he had misused none as yet; he was reserving his supply for grisailles within the palace grounds. Certainly no magical grisailles were discovered in his attic. He may have already delivered any such grisailles to Sara, who had taken them with her when she decamped. Alternatively, those had been used and smashed during the premature attack on Bellogard. Indisputably, Meshko had painted inside the Samostan grounds —which is where Slon was ambushed as he returned from the hunt. But Queen Alyitsa had been reached directly and brutally by Prince Feryava, using normal attack magic.

On balance it seemed unlikely that Sara had fled with any crucial magic grisailles; certainly with none that could provide subtle windows into the heart of the palace.

Isgalt graciously — and in confidence — let me keep the sketchbook for myself, after she had examined it for a day or so. As I was eventually to realize, she had a subtle motive for this act of generosity. At the time I merely rejoiced. The charcoal of those sketches mightn't in itself be magical, but the studies of Sara certainly were.

So how about Meshko's royal commission? Let me sketch a visit that I paid him subsequently in his locked artist's aerie.

A guard admitted me to a decent enough, spacious room with big, bright, barred windows. An unmade bed. A table crowded with paints and inks, brushes and pens, not to mention a bottle of wine, half a loaf, a ripe cheese, the remains of a roast chicken.

Days of mourning, days of marriage festival had been over many weeks since. The reign of Queen Isgalt had well and truly commenced. The palace was at peace, as was Bellogard and the whole domain. The peace might last a year, or a decade.

Meshko sat at a desk, smoking a pipe of rum-shag. Before him lay an open book in which he was roughing out an illustration of vineyards from memory.

He laid down his pencil. "I swear I'll go mad, Dino."

"Isn't this the dream of any artist from the provinces? Well fed, well housed, working for the queen herself?"

"A bird singing its heart out in a cage! How many blank volumes *are* there in that damned Bibliotek? No one will let me go to see for myself. I've hardly filled up one yet!"

"Several thousand," I said, and he groaned.

"I'm sure the queen doesn't expect you to fill them all. Even if it were possible, that might be dangerous. Yet to fill up a few dozen—"

"A *few* dozen? he repeated hopefully. "Thirty-six? Forty-eight?"

"—to fill up a few dozen will lessen the emptiness, she feels. It may help strengthen the kingdom, if the artistic standard is high enough."

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"It is, it is. I know she'll inspect each volume when I finish — before she puts it back on its shelf in the dust!"

I crossed to the desk. "May I?"

"Why not?" He paced to the bars and stared out.

I turned pages that were beautifully illuminated with landscapes, villages, farms he had seen in his travels; though showing a certain preference for gray tones. A figure in one rural scene caught my eye. I peered closer. Surely that was Sara. I turned a page. Sara's face! This time her features occupied most of the foreground, with a waterfall cascading behind her hair, white behind black.

On most pages, Meshko had controlled his passion. Sara still put in some kind of an appearance on about one page in eight. She featured as reaper and milkmaid, horse rider and goatherd, dancer at a village fete.

I felt a pang of jealousy that he could so readily re-create her image. I also experienced a certain stifled satisfaction that this "rival" of mine was safely locked up far from any chance of meeting her again.

"You seem to have a limited repertoire of faces," I remarked. "Is this your sister from Letto?"

"No," he croaked. He didn't bother to turn. "No."

So he didn't know about my own relationship with Sara.

"I think you ought to vary your models."

"How? By using people down in town? They're a bit too far away. I can't quite make them out!"

"I'll persuade someone to pose for you," I promised. "Only as minor figures in a scene, understand?"

It might amuse — and distract — the three unsuccessful princesses to have their portraits included in a magical volume. Fiery Ysa, mercurial Aseult, sly Izold . . .

No. I knew whom I would prevail on. Margarita. Margarita might persuade our artist to forget about Sara.

I wished that Margarita could similarly induce me to forget.

However, Sara had surely magicked me. Not with any pawnmagic —only with her person.

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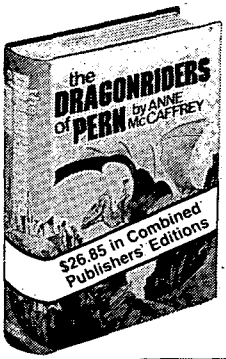

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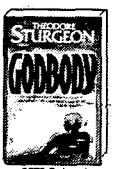

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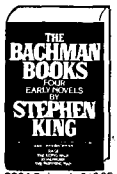

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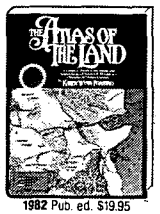

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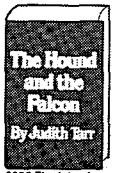

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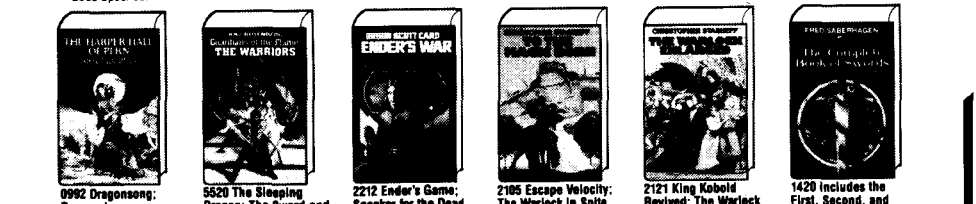

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